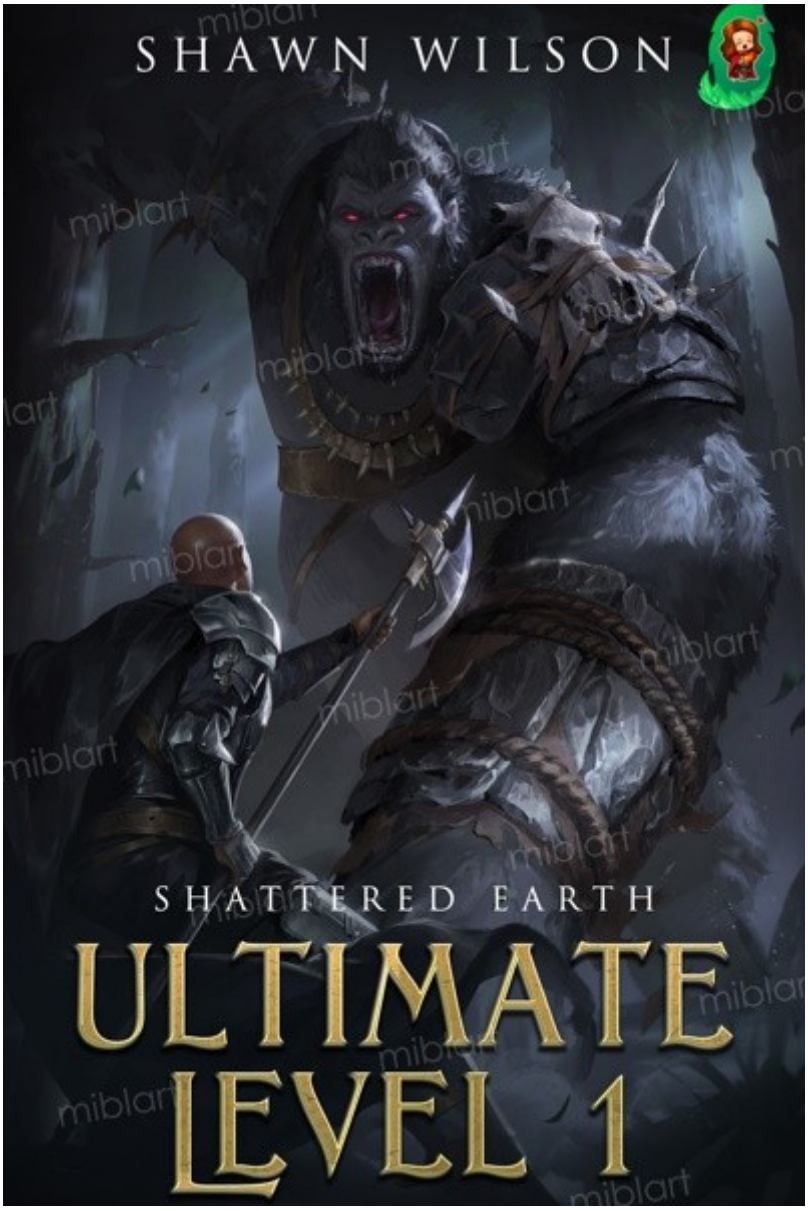

Max wanted to be a [Baker].
Settle down, bake stuff, and enjoy life.
The gods, however, ruined that dream. Given [Baker] and a black skill, he is now running for his life, trying to grow strong enough to return home.

LitRPG

Starting Slow Burn but will begin to grow faster as the story goes

Book 1 Finished - Stubbed on Amazon 2/23 Here

Book 2 - Finished - Stubbed on Amazon 4/23 Here!

Book 3: Finished - Hits Amazon 7/1!

Book 4: Finished - Editing (Goal is August 30th during DragonCon release on Amazon)

Book 5: Writing (2024-06-25);

112 - Unfettered Power

112 - Unfettered Power - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

Feelings warred within Max for a second as he loosed the monster inside.

Trepidation at what he might do once he released control and the joy he already felt rising from within.

Joy at the unbridled strength that filled every fiber of his being.

Max crossed the distance between him and the elves in a moment, only taking a few steps, as he watched everything as a spectator within his own body.

The elves were shocked when Max swung his halberd without concern for being flagged as a murderer.

Enjoy the show, and let me show you what we are truly capable of…

[Berserker Activated]

The power filled Max’s body, yet his mind was at peace. The first elf before him was a warrior covered in full plate armor, and yet when Max’s halberd swung with the bladed axe coming at him, his shield was still by his side.

A plate helm flew up into the air as the warrior's neck was sliced through with surgical precision.

His foe's expressions seemed frozen in shock, mouths opening and words attempting to come forth, and yet none could comprehend what was in their midst.

Max felt the power of the ice area of effect beginning to cast as his weapon cleaved a healer positioned behind the headless corpse in half.

Blood sprayed as the weapon tore through her body, and Max watched as the swing didn’t stop, catching another victim in the side.

The bladed edge ran through their waist and then up and out their neck, slicing them in half diagonally.

As their body fell to the ground, the two halves sliding apart, the first elf able to respond was coming at Max with two swords.

A male elf wearing chain armor, his body flashing green, for longer than usual, not because of the ability but because everything seemed to be slowing down around Max.

Max twisted and turned, his weapon almost whistling as it moved through the air, moving toward the man’s midsection in a wide swing.

The elf warrior saw the weapon coming toward him as he charged and brought both swords together in an ‘x’ to block the attack.

A loud crack, followed by the shattering of bones and the first scream Max recalled hearing, came from the elf as his body was launched like a small stone struck by a stick.

The warrior crashed into the elf behind him, starting to spin from the impact before colliding with a wall twenty yards away.

It was too far to hear the crunching sound the elf's body made when it impacted the stone wall, but when it finally fell to the ground, the warrior didn't get back up.

A smile flashed across Max's lips as he sensed two people stealthed and approaching him.

Their corpses fell with thuds, both cut like ribbons with a pair of sharp scissors.

See what we can do… feel how they fall… like wheat stalks before the thresher…

The power was overwhelming.

He felt unstoppable.

No one felt worthy to stand before him.

Max wanted to reply, but nothing came out. He could see and feel everything, yet a tinge of fear ensnared his heart as Max realized he had no control.

Five seconds later, four more bodies fell as the remaining two elves, both mages who stood a few yards behind where the others had been, attempted to cast a spell.

Their hands were raised, and both appeared to be casting a root spell, but before either of them finished, the halberd cut their extended arms off.

He had dashed forward, one step covering the distance, his weapon whistling through the air as it spun in his hand.

Before their severed arms hit the ground, both had lost their heads.

An ice bolt struck him in the back, and Max watched as his body spun, looking at the remaining twelve men and women coming toward him.

One had cast a spell at Talina, and the flames had erupted, licking around the stone wall she had cast.

Anger, rage, and hatred filled his heart.

Yes! Give in! Let me have revenge!

Every step covered ten yards, an impossible feat to believe. Yet Max knew nothing was impossible anymore as his halberd thrust forward, the tip sliding through a warrior's chain armor and exiting the warrior's back.

He watched as the shaft twisted sideways slightly, drawing back and using the elf, now stuck against the axe blade and hammer part of his halberd, as a weapon.

Cries rang out as Max slammed the body into an approaching elf.

Two more elves activated abilities, one a warrior and another a rogue.

He didn’t care. They meant nothing to him.

His halberd slammed down on a warrior, who held his shield up to block the incoming attack.

The elf appeared stronger than the rest, moving faster than the others, but it didn’t matter as he grunted from the force of the blow that hit his shield.

Gore sprayed out as the corpse at the end of Max’s weapon turned into paste from the blow.

The spray covered a stealthed rogue nearby, exposing a blood-covered figure as his skill failed.

Max ignored the warrior, still trying to regain his footing after the strike to his shield.

Two quick thrusts of his weapon dropped the rogue as the other warrior came at him.

Whatever skill this one had activated hadn’t done enough, as the head of Max’s weapon turned the elf’s head into a mist from the impact.

The warrior shouted something in Elvish, and Max understood it even though he didn’t know the language.

Yes, I can help with that too.

“Run! Tell the others!” the warrior cried out.

Laughter came from the alley, and Max realized it was coming from his mouth.

The remaining elves began to sprint, running away toward the side street.

He charged the warrior before him, the elf holding his shield out to block the incoming attack. Instead, Max jumped onto his shield and propelled himself toward the fleeing elves.

The last one trying to run away was only a few yards from the cart when Max ran her down. His halberd sheared her clean in half, her mage’s robe not even frayed from the cut.

The second the killing blow was made, he rushed back at the warrior, the only one left standing, who was still trying to take it all in.

Four attacks later, the elf was on the ground, each of his limbs cut off at the joint.

Max leaned over the elf, ignoring his shouts and cries of pain.

“You zealots never learn.”

Max could hear his voice, but it sounded different. It was still his voice, yet there was a power behind it.

“You’ll watch me eat your heart before you die!”

His hand thrust toward the warrior’s chest.

“Seth!”

A single inch of space remained when his hand stopped its thrust.

Stop! Don’t do that!

You have no idea how fantastic of a feeling it is. Holding the beating heart of your enemy in your hand.

Like lightning, his hand came back up, and the hammer portion of the halberd crushed the armor over the elf’s heart, ending his life.

His weapon was gone, stored again, and Max heard the sound of shouts coming from both ends of the street.

He turned to see Tanila looking at him, her eyes wide in horror, tears running down her cheeks.

I have kept my part of the deal. Enjoy the victory. Realize what we can do together, what we can become.

Tanila had paused ten feet away, watching him, trembling as if she wanted to approach but couldn’t.

Give me back control!

You must wait! If I relinquish it now, the berserker ability will cause you to attack your friend. I believe you would blame me for that death.

Time seemed to drag in his heightened state, and Max heard the sounds of shouts getting closer.

This next part falls to you. If you desire to fight your way out, I will make no promises about innocents. I will simply allow us to survive.

Finally, the presence that controlled him vanished as his body sagged as the ability wore off.

“Seth?” Tanila asked as she took a step toward him.

Max nodded and moved closer, wanting to reach out his arms and embrace her.

Then he saw the blood that covered them. Glancing at his body, he realized that he was covered in blood, bits of flesh, bone, and other matter.

“You need to go,” she whispered, her voice trembling as she watched him struggle to accept how he looked.

“Where?” Max asked, glancing at the carts on both sides and seeing one of them starting to move. “Could I make it anywhere safe?”

Tanila moved to where he was and grabbed his arm.

“Stand behind me, move closer to the wall. If things go south, use your haste ability and get away.”

“What about y–”

“I am not flagged for murder. You are.”

Those words cut deep. He was a murderer. Every one of these elves was dead because of him, yet if he hadn’t done this, he and Tanila might be the ones bleeding out on the ground, never to rise again.

“I…”

His statement was cut off as the carts on his right were rolled away, and half a dozen guards froze as they entered the street.

Tanila and Max watched the guards as their eyes scanned the scene.

Blood, body parts, entrails, and more were strewn about. It looked like a battle had taken place, and in the middle of it, hiding near a wall, were two people, one covered in gore and flagged for murder, the other holding her hands out wide, barring any who might come toward them.

“Don’t move!”

The shout drew Max and Tanila’s eyes to a woman wearing plate armor and a helm with a large plume striding past her men. The sight of all the bodies on the street didn’t seem to faze her, and she walked with purpose, not having drawn her weapon yet.

Max could sense that the woman was far more muscular than he was, and based on how she moved, he wasn’t sure if he could get away, even with his haste ability.

“You two!” she shouted, never slowing her pace, “Resist, and I will strike both of you down!”

“We are innocent!” Talina yelled. “They attacked us! He did –”

“I said quiet!”

The woman’s voice echoed in the street, and Max saw that there were over twenty guards streaming in from both sides.

“Captain Vella!” one of the soldiers called out, “You should see this!”

The woman paused her approach as she turned to see what the guard ran up within his hand.

She held the item, turning it over in her chain gloves.

Her helm turned, and Max felt her eyes appraising him.

She motioned with her free hand, and a dozen guards moved toward Max and Talina, surrounding them in a half-circle. No weapons were out, but Max could tell it was only a moment away if their captain called for them.

“It’s him,” the man who had given something to the captain said.

The captain’s head bobbed slightly.

The man who was standing behind her watched Max. His blue eyes could not hide his surprise at recognizing who Max was.

“Seth Pendal. Would you care to tell me what happened here and why you are currently flagged as a murderer?”

Max nodded, gently touching Tanila’s arm to get her to lower it as he moved in front of her.

“I will. I just ask that no matter what happens, my friend is unharmed.”

Captain Vella’s helmet vanished, her face surprising Max with a massive scar that ran from one ear to her lip. Her brown hair was trimmed short, and her brown eyes seemed to shine as she smiled at him. Her face seemed to smirk as the scar raised one side of her cheek.

“I have no problems letting someone not flagged for murder go. You, on the other hand, will need to explain to me why I shouldn’t strike you down right here.”

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

Welcome to Book 3!

May you find the action fast and the joys of what's coming even better!

Obviously, you know by now that book 3 is done! I'm well into writing book 4 and having a blast. I got to say, book 3 was a TON of fun and where it ends.... so good...

Book 4 - Get ready for something new. It's going to get popping :)

in honor of the book 3 launch, my merch store has procured the strongest item ever to grace its page. Almost as powerful as the One Ring.

113 - A Buffet of Gains

113 - A Buffet of Gains - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

That moment in the street almost made Max feel like a bard at an inn, telling a tall-tale and doing his best to ensure everyone who heard it believed every word he spoke.

The guards surrounding him occasionally made sounds in reply, each time quieting down when Vella barely tsked her tongue.

After he finished, the only sound around him was the noise from both ends of the street. Max waited and watched the captain’s face.

“How many bodies, Sergeant?”

“Twenty-four, Ma’am.”

She tapped her chain gloves against her plate vambraces, her arms crossed as she watched Max.

“Twenty-four elves dead and only one person, a level thirty if I recall, standing here alive.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Two of the elves we were able to… identify had traces of the system showing they were murderers- the parts that remained, that is.”

Vella nodded slowly. The edge of her lips seemed to betray a slight smile, but Max wasn’t sure if this was wishful thinking or just the scar and how it connected there.

“I will require you to submit to an inspection, Seth Pendal. I will personally take you with my squad, and we will return to the outpost on this side of town. You will be sequestered there until your flagged state has worn off.”

Tanila started to speak but stopped when the woman gazed her way, closing her mouth as the captain gave a slight nod.

“I had already heard of the attempt on your life in the inn. That knowledge, combined with what you both told me and the clues we can deduce from here; I believe your story.”

She turned and motioned to the blue-eyed sergeant to come closer, “Bring me a transport wagon. I want twelve guards with me the entire way. And make sure you send someone to the outpost to inform them of what has happened.”

The man gave a quick salute and took off toward the entrance of the street they had come from. Some shouting was heard and Max ignored it, turning back to the woman, who had moved till she was just a yard from him.

Standing this close made Max realize she was taller than him by a foot and seemed to have at least fifty pounds of muscle on him.

“I hate to admit it, but you are a different adventurer than most. I can tell from what happened here that you have a skill that explains how you killed that noble’s son. I witnessed it and wondered, yet now…” She paused and turned her head, looking at the carnage her guards were beginning to clean up. “I am not certain how no one has heard of your name until now.”

Max did his best to keep a straight face.

“Some of my friends are dealing with some things that we would prefer to keep quiet,” Max said as he motioned to Tanila with his head. “I only entered the fights to earn money to help a sick friend.”

“I heard,” she said, chuckling after. “Your ability to stay hidden is long gone now. All you can do now is make people wonder if they should keep away. What happened here will give your enemies something to think about, but you will probably find they won’t wait forever before attempting again.”

“Remember, Sir,” the guard said as he opened the door. “You cannot access your dimensional storage inside. The wagon will prevent it, and an alarm will go off if you attempt it.”

Max nodded and glanced at his undergarments, having been forced to remove everything but his jewelry.

“At least you’re not bound,” Tanila teased.

He grunted and climbed into the wooden cart that would take him to the outpost. Memories of the one he had been locked in back in his hometown almost made him unable to breathe.

Tanila held her hand out to him from inside, knowing why Max was slow to get in.

“I’m right here,” she whispered, waiting for him.

Sitting on the bench along one side, Max grunted and closed his eyes, leaning his head against the wooden wall.

He heard the cart's door shut and the lock click and realized he was squeezing his leg with his hand tighter than he had intended.

“That bad?”

Max opened his eyes and saw Tanila sitting next to him. Thankfully, this cart had two bright light orbs in it.

“It is. I didn’t realize how much it bothered me until now.”

She grabbed his arm and gave it a squeeze.

“If you do that too much, you’ll be covered in this mess.”

Tanila laughed and squeezed even tighter. “How could I be worried about that after what I saw? I mean… I still can’t believe…”

Looking into Max’s eyes, she smiled. “Your eyes are back to normal. During that time, they were a green flame. You moved so fast, I couldn’t even…”

The cart lurched forward, and Max felt her squeeze his arm again.

“I’m sorry I had to do that. There was no–”

“Don’t apologize,” Tanila said, cutting him off. “You did what you had to in order to protect us… to protect me. I saw you watching me when it was over. For a moment, I wasn’t sure if you would do anything to me. When your eyes returned to normal, I knew you were back.”

Max bobbed his head and let out a small sigh.

“What was it like?” she asked.

Scratching his eyebrow, Max closed his eyes as he tried to figure out how to describe it.

“Remember how it was watching the people in the Colosseum fight? You could see them on the orb but knew it wasn’t how the real fight occurred. That was how it was for me. I could see myself moving and feeling everything that happened, but it was like I was watching it also. I was…”

Max turned and saw Talina giving him her full attention, a small smile on her lips.

“I was angry, so upset that they would possibly harm you. It fed that part of me… made it stronger. We were, I mean, I was unstoppable. The world slowed down. And my skill didn’t overwhelm me like it had before. It wasn’t a blind rage but a controlled rage as I killed every one of them. It was… intoxicating.”

“How much stronger did you get?”

Having forgotten the other part of his skill, Max saw the notifications waiting for him.

“Gods, I never even thought to check.”

[3 Constitution Consumed]

[3 Intelligence Consumed]

[3 Wisdom Consumed]

[2 Constitution Consumed]

[3 Dexterity Consumed]

[3 Dexterity Consumed]

[3 Constitution Consumed]

[2 Constitution Consumed]

[2 Dexterity Consumed]

[3 Intelligence Consumed]

[3 Wisdom Consumed]

[3 Intelligence Consumed]

[3 Wisdom Consumed]

[1 Dexterity Consumed]

[2 Strength Consumed]

[3 Intelligence Consumed]

[3 Wisdom Consumed]

[5 Intelligence Consumed]

[1 Wisdom Consumed]

[6 Intelligence Consumed]

[2 Wisdom Consumed]

[6 Constitution Consumed]

[Consume has successfully Consumed Multiple Skills]

[Consumed Skills are Equal or Lower Rank to Current Skills]

[Would you like to learn [Bulwark]?]

[Would you like to learn [Throwing Weapons]?]

[Would you like to learn [Poison Making]?]

[Would you like to learn [Trap Detection]?]

[Yes / No]

“Uh…”

Words failed Max as he read the list of notifications. He struggled at the sight of all the skills he had gained from that fight, but the stats alone were hard to believe.

Taking a minute, Max double-checked his math.

“Based on my stats, I’m over level fifty,” he whispered, watching Tanila’s jaw drop.

Bobbing his head as she mouthed, ‘*seriously*,’ she eventually closed her mouth and leaned her head back against the cart.

“Holy elf tits,” she muttered.

Max gently poked her. “There were four skills, and Fowl won’t be excited about one of them. It’s the same as his.”

Rolling her eyes, Tanila shook her head, “Yeah, he won’t like that at all.”

Selecting yes, Max felt the rush of knowledge flood his mind.

After wincing for a moment, Max grinned.

[Status Check]

*****

Max Hoste

18-Year-old Human Male

Level 1

Exp 1/1000

HP: 720/720

MP: 560/560

Stamina: 220/220

STR: 45+9

DEX: 56+15

CON: 60+12

INT: 47+9

WIS: 38+8

Skills:

Baking - Common

Consume - Rare

Melee Weapon Mastery - Rare

Shield -Common

Berserker - Common

Elemental Mastery - Uncommon

Stealth - Rare

Dual Wield - Common

Power Strike - Uncommon

Backstab - Uncommon

Evasion - Uncommon

Archery - Common

Haste - Uncommon

Festering Touch - Common

Death Magic - Uncommon

Conceal - Epic

Regeneration - Rare

Bulwark - Rare

Sling Weapons - Rare

Throwing Weapons - Rare

Poison Making - Uncommon

Trap Detection - Uncommon

Armored Warrior - Rare

Dark Magic - Rare

*****

“Gods, a forty-seven intelligence? That is completely broken!”

Max chuckled and grinned as Tanila complained.

“I guess eventually we will see how much all those shiny new stats will help.”

“The problem is no strength,” Max replied. “It appears very few actually put many points in that stat.”

“That’s because there are very few warriors like you. A rogue knows that dexterity and constitution are two of their greatest allies. Your strength is so high, which explains why many struggle to stand toe-to-toe with you.”

The ride was uneventful, and when the cart came to a halt and the sound of the door unlatching turned into the last rays of sunlight coming through the door, Max let out a quiet sigh of relief.

“If you two will follow me.”

Max and Tanila were encircled by a dozen guards who escorted them toward a stone building within a courtyard surrounded by thirty-foot walls.

“We are going in there,” Vella informed them as she walked ahead. “No worries; we are only maintaining formality for now. Once inside, I will get you both settled.”

The room she brought the two of them into was small but had a few chairs and a table with some food waiting for them.

“Go ahead and eat. It will be a few minutes before I can get the quarters set up for both of you.”

“Thank you, Captain Vella.” Tanila said. “Is there any chance we can send a message to our friends?”

“It's already taken care of,” she replied with a smile. “I sent two guards to find your companion and let him know that both of you were okay and would be sequestered for a few days.”

“We appreciate that.”

The captain nodded and left the two of them with their dinner. It wasn't anything like Alexander had prepared, but neither complained about the simple bread and stew.

Eventually, two guards brought them to a pair of rooms in a barracks cleared of soldiers. Each room had a bed and a small tub with steaming water waiting for them.

"Captain Vella told us to let you both know there will be guards on duty at all times," a younger-looking guard told Max. "If either of you two needs something, just call out. No one will come inside unless they pass the guard at the end of the hallway. We will bring breakfast in the morning."

Max nodded, and the young man gave him a small salute.

"I'm not a guard," Max said. "Why salute me?"

Both guards smirked at his question.

"Sir, your reputation in the Colosseum had already made you a legend in some ways. Hearing what you somehow survived, unharmed, has…" The younger guard looked at his partner, who shrugged and said nothing. "A salute is the greatest symbol I can give for respect. You, sir, have earned that."

Max smiled and stood straight, saluting both guards, who returned the salute once more before turning and heading down the hallway.

"We are so screwed," Tanila said with a groan.

"Why?"

"Because we will never get your head through these doors after all this."

Max laughed and motioned to his room. "Are you okay with me going inside and taking a bath? I really feel the need to get clean."

Tanila nodded and moved into her room. As she started to close her door, she stopped and stuck her head out.

"Thank you again for saving me. Even if it meant… opening yourself to something I know you didn't want to."

"That's what we do for family. We protect each other."

Max saw her face change slightly, but she nodded and closed her door.

Sitting in the tub, watching the crimson-colored water, Max felt himself trying to forget what he had experienced today.

We both know you want to feel like that again. Do not deny it.

Max washed his face, ignoring the color of the water.

"Thank you for keeping your word," he muttered, wiping the water from his eyes.

Laugher echoed inside, and Max knew he was in trouble. The hunger inside him had grown.

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

Nothing like an all you can eat buffet :)

114 - True Commitment

[114 - True Commitment - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

The moment his head hit the poor excuse for a pillow, Max fell asleep. The exhaustion from what had transpired and all of the changes in his physical body finally caught up with him at that moment.

Dreams shifted multiple times as he replayed how that fight in the street could have gone, sometimes dying, sometimes killing Tanila, and other times never returning to who he was.

The dream repeats of the scene finally wound down before he found himself in a dark place...

All those fears you have make no sense. I have shown you what we can be if you let me help.

Staring at his reflection, the way it stared back at him was almost unnerving. His reflection's eyes were sometimes red, sometimes green, and occasionally just black voids of darkness.

"What are you? I mean, really. How can you be inside me?"

That same laughter he always heard echoed around him, and yet his reflection stood there like a statue.

I already told you what I am. Without a host, without you, I am nothing. Together, we can be–

"A god, I know," Max said, cutting off his shadow as he held up his hand. "Why did I resist Edward's skill but only partially whatever skill the Queen had?"

A smile formed on his reflection's face. Teeth far sharper than Max's were displayed as its lips moved apart.

That is an intelligent question. The boy had a skill that came from me. You are not ready for that knowledge yet, but know nothing that is a child of mine can hurt us. They help us to grow.

"A chi–"

Wait and listen, his reflection said. Then Max's vocal cords suddenly stopped working. ***That 'queen' has something from one of my sister's skills. We are***

still weak and, as such, could only partially resist it. As we grow stronger, none of those will be a threat.

The pressure around his throat was gone, and Max realized he could finally speak again.

“This hunger inside me… does it ever go away?”

His image howled in laughter, cackling as its whole body shook.

Does a fat noble decide they have eaten enough and stop? No… it never goes away. It will always be there. One day, perhaps, it might end, but when that moment comes, nothing will be able to stand against you.

Those words left Max confused and scared. He was already starting to like the power he had experienced and knew it would be harder to resist the stronger he got.

Do not worry right now, his reflection said, reading his mind. ***I can wait; eventually, you will need to give yourself to me again. It always happens that way. When the next time comes, I won’t let the bargain be as much in your favor.***

His reflection raised its hand and tapped his forehead with a finger.

Go. Enjoy the last gift I have for you.

“Seth!”

Hearing that name finally woke him from his slumber. He turned, surprised to find Tanila staring at him from the doorway.

The memory of what he had just experienced flooded his brain.

“Sorry,” she said once she saw he was awake. “I figured you might want to get out of bed and meet with our guests.”

Rubbing his eyes, Max spun his legs over the edge of his bed and stretched, his body feeling better than he could ever remember. He knew the voice inside him was correct. He wanted to feel this every day.

“Can I ask who our guests are?” he asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

“Batrire and Fowl are waiting for us,” she replied, grinning as his expression changed at her words. “Now get dressed and come join us.”

She left the room, closing the door, and he jumped to his feet, quickly getting dressed and pulling his boots on before opening the door and glancing toward Tanila’s room.

As he prepared to step into the hallway, a notification popped up.

[Consume is Cleansing JIH1U08]

[Consume will notify when finished]

The message made Max pause.

Cleansing what? What are you doing?

Nothing replied, and after a moment, Max took a deep breath and tried to forget about it.

Tanila's door was open, and he could hear laughter and a few whispers as his friends waited for him to join them.

As he entered the room, Batrire stood up from a chair while Fowl appeared ready to catch her if she fell.

"Gods, you are an idiot," Batrire said, scowling at Max as the red murderer glow caught her eye when he entered the doorway. "I leave you alone for one–"

Max was across the open space, picking her up off her feet, giving a hug, and squeezing her tight. She returned the embrace and, after a moment when Max set her back down, wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Thank you," Batrire said, sniffing as she held up a hand to keep Fowl away. "I'm grateful for what you did to save me."

"I would have given anything, you were–"

"Forget me," Batrire cut him off with a wave of her hand. "I have already heard about what I endured and what you three have done since I was put in the stasis spell. What I don't understand, and what Tanila hasn't told us about, is what happened yesterday."

Fowl was walking around Max, shaking his head in disbelief as Batrire spoke.

"Holy elf tits," Fowl cursed, coming up next to Max and punching him in the arm. "Tell me, what in the gods' name did you do?"

Pointing at the chairs, Max moved to the doorway and looked toward the other end of the hall, where a door was closed and guards were stationed on the other side. Shutting it, he held up a finger to his lips.

"Sit… it's going to be a story…"

Fowl grimaced, groaning at the news that Max now had Bulwark, the same skill he had just picked up at level twenty-five. "You seriously aren't going to need us at some point, are you?"

"I'll always need someone to cut the balls off the ogres I kill," teased Max. Looking at Batrire, who had sat there the entire time, barely saying a word, he saw how she looked at him.

"What?"

Having drawn attention to how she was sitting, Tanila and Fowl looked at her, waiting to see what she might say.

“How long till we have to move again?” Batrire asked.

“What do you mean?”

She leaned forward in her chair and looked at Max, staring at him sternly. “Are we going to have to leave this city because of the group you just fought? Is word going to get out about what you did and make it so we cannot stay? How many more times will we need to pack up and move?”

“Batrire, why are you–”

Her glare cut Fowl off. “I almost died. I should have died, yet you saved me. For that, I am grateful, but I am also concerned for my other friends. I tried to trust that Ockrim must have some reason for us meeting and grouping with you, but now… I’m scared. I’m scared, Seth, of what you might become and what might happen to us.”

Max nodded, staring at the ground.

No one said anything after Batrire finished speaking. Fowl glanced back and forth between his three friends, waiting for someone to talk.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Fowl said, jumping to his feet and moving to stand before Batrire. “He risked his life for you to get the money so you could live. Everything he has done has been to protect us. You don’t understand what that pressure is like!”

“Fowl, you don’t –”

Cutting her off by slapping away the hand that Batrire had raised toward him, Fowl shook his head and glared at her. Snorting, he pointed a finger at her, then turned and motioned to Max.

“He is a warrior, a protector, and one of the few humans I would completely trust with your life. In fact, I already have, and it is only because of him that you are alive today! If you cannot handle him with all the faults and struggles he openly shares, then we are done.”

Those last four words echoed in the room, all caught off guard while Fowl stood there, his rapid breathing causing his mustache to flare in and out.

“Are you serious?” Batrire asked.

“There are only three things in life that I am serious about,” Fowl replied. “First, I love you more than anything. Second, I would die for you. Lastly, I will never abandon a friend.” Pointing his finger at Max again, Fowl shook his head. “He is a friend and, as we said multiple times, family. Family isn’t perfect. We make mistakes, we upset each other, but we do not abandon each other. You… you know my hope is to return one day to my family, prove my worth, and earn back my place among them.”

Tears ran down Batrire's cheeks, disappearing into her beard. She nodded and glanced past Fowl at Max, who sat there stunned by his two dwarven friends' words.

“Fowl,” Tanila said, getting his attention for a moment. “She is coping with almost dying, and it takes time to–”

“How many of us have almost died?” Fowl asked, cutting her off. “I have. Did I pack it up? No. You all made sure I kept pushing because this is the life we chose for ourselves. Not everyone here can go back to baking.”

Fowl’s random comment caught them off guard for a second, and everyone chuckled slightly. Fowl winked at Tanila and smiled. In a rare feat, his wordplay was working as intended.

Getting down on his knees, Fowl leaned against Batrire as she sat in her chair. He put a hand on her knee and squeezed.

“You know I am right. It doesn’t happen often, and I will remind you of it often, but deep down in your beautiful heart, you know I am right. We cannot abandon Max.”

Watching his friends fight about him hurt. Max didn’t want to endanger them, and the idea that he was causing this much conflict hurt even more. Yet Max understood just how much he meant to Fowl and the others for the first time in a long time.

A notification appeared, and Max felt something in him change.

[Consume is Cleansing JIH1U08]

[Consume has finished Cleansing JIH1U08]

Something had happened, but Max couldn’t figure out what.

“Holy dwarf balls,” Tanila muttered, her eyes on Max as she covered her mouth with her hand.

Both dwarves turned their attention to Max, and he saw each of their eyes widen in shock.

“Holy elf–”

“I cursed first,” Tanila said, standing up and moving to where Max was sitting, looking at the three of them. “It’s gone.”

She walked around him.

“What is gone?”

“The murderer’s aura… it’s gone…”

Standing up, Max glanced at himself and knew why he felt different. He couldn’t see any aura around him and realized they were right.

“How in the gods' names did that happen?” Fowl asked.

“My skill… it said it was cleansing something… could it really?”

A knock on the door made them all jump.

“Who is it?” Tanila called out, her voice squeaking from the shock of everything.

“It’s Captain Vella. Can I come in?”

Tanila held up her hands as she looked at the other three.

Max shrugged and motioned to the door.

“Yes! Come in.”

The door swung open, and the commander walked in, her short brown hair hanging nearly to the plate armor she wore.

“I'm glad you all are here. I need to…” Her eyes went wide, and her brow scrunched in confusion as she saw Max standing before her. “How in the gods…”

115 - Getting Back At It

[115 - Getting Back At It - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“I’m not sure,” Max replied, answering honestly. “It just vanished. What does that mean?”

The captain strode over, grabbing Max firmly and turning him around. She looked him up and down. Rubbing her chin, she looked Max up and down, visibly confused that the aura was missing.

“How… that’s not possible… I mean…”

Her mouth kept moving, but no words formed as she inspected him multiple times.

“It doesn’t change no matter the angle you look at him, Captain,” Tanila said, trying not to smile at the confusion they all were sharing. “Would this mean we are free to go?”

The question brought Vella back from her shock, and she stood straight, glancing at the two dwarves near her.

“I… I actually had some things I needed to discuss with you four and my commanding officer, but… When did this happen?”

“Just before you knocked, actually,” Max replied. “We were talking, and it vanished. I’m not sure why. Do you think the system knows I am innocent?”

The Captain’s usually calm and composed face showed none of that now. Bewilderment was apparent, and she couldn’t stop the occasional shaking of her head as she continued to stare at Max.

“It would appear that something has changed… Perhaps I can…” She paused, tapping her chin with a finger while considering the change in events. “Actually, it might be better if the four of you left immediately. I will send someone to talk with you later, but if you can be seen around town, it might help me with my problem even more.”

“Problem?” Tanila asked.

Nodding, Vella turned and moved back a few paces so she could look at all four of them at once. “Rumor has it that Seth Pendal was in a fight and killed a group of elves. I have done everything I could to stop this rumor, but if you can be seen around town, it would be hard for people to believe such a thing since obviously you ‘*should*’ be flagged a murderer for at least seven days. For the system to do this…”

Tanila didn’t hesitate. She moved over to the table, where she had a few things sitting out.

Noticing Max was still standing and not moving, she pointed to the door. “You heard the Captain. Go get your stuff, and let’s leave. I feel the need to do a light dungeon if Batrire is up for it.”

Their healer glanced at Tanila and then at Vella before shaking her head. “Sounds like something we all could use.”

The looks they had gotten on the street after being dropped off discreetly in an alleyway by Vella and two of her guards were nothing compared to the expressions of the other adventurers as they walked into the guild hall.

“It appears the Captain was right about the rumors,” Tanila whispered to Max as people shuffled out of their way. “No doubt this will stop some of them.”

Nodding and smiling, Max couldn’t help but wonder what the people were thinking.

“Seth!”

Turning to the voice that called his name he saw Khorus, the dwarven rogue he had partied with in the troll dungeon, running toward him.

“Gods man, I heard you had died or, worse yet, had killed a ton of elves!”

Noticing the look on the dwarf’s face and seeing Ulyik coming running up behind him, Max shrugged.

“I have heard that rumor as well. Perhaps there is another Seth Pendal out there doing these things?”

Khorus nodded and laughed, looking at the others standing near Max. “These the party members you were talking about?”

“They are. This is Tanila, our mage. Batrire, our amazing healer, and Fowl, our resident meat shield.”

After each of them had exchanged greetings, Ulyik approached Max and leaned in. “Careful out there. Rumor has it some people think you murdered a bunch of elves. I didn’t believe it, but I’m sure you know some wouldn’t hesitate to kill a human for that.”

Max gave a slight nod. “I understand and appreciate the warning. Hopefully, people will realize I am not the Seth Pendal they are looking for.”

“Probably those bastard nobles whose son you killed in the arena trying to stir things up,” Khorus said before spitting on the ground.

“I know people will talk about anything but, for now, we are heading into a dungeon.”

Both dwarves waved and wished them good luck.

“This is going to make our lives harder, isn’t it?” asked Fowl.

“Only time will tell,” replied Max.

“Gods, this isn’t fair,” Fowl cursed as Max cleaved the head off another dragonkin warrior with a single strike. “You’re basically able to kill all of them on your own now.”

“At least the experience is good, and Batrire isn’t having to work that hard.”

Fowl nodded in agreement before swapping out his hammer and shield to harvest items from the dragonkin. “I guess I shouldn’t complain. The experience is amazing, especially at the speed at which we are clearing this.”

“Correction, the speed at which Seth is clearing this,” Batrire added, doing her best to smile and join in on the teasing.

Fowl winked and bobbed his head. “Yes, yes… I’m just the meat shield that looks pretty.”

“Who said anything about being pretty?” Tanila asked, laughing as the others joined in.

Holding up his middle finger, Fowl smiled before turning to slice open one of the corpses.

“We sure about this?” Fowl asked as they looked at the massive ten foot tall pair of stone golems slowly meandering around the canyon the group was positioned in.

“Everything I’ve read says they are slow but hit super hard and are resistant to most magic and slashing weapons,” Max replied. “With your mace and my halberd, we should be fine.”

“There’s that keyword again, ‘should’ be fine.”

Max nodded and activated stealth as Fowl threw a stone to attract the attention of the golems.

The speed at which the golems approached was slightly faster than everyone's walking speed, requiring Fowl to move closer rather than letting them come to him.

As Max drew near, the golem closest to him turned and raised a hand.

His Stealth dropping, Max rolled sideways and out of the attack range. He actually felt the ground shake when its stone fist smashed into it. Where it hit, the ground fractured from the impact.

“Careful!” Max shouted. He swung the hammer side of his halberd and hit the back leg of the golem, causing the stone to crack. “If they hit you it will hurt!”

Fowl laughed, preparing for the slam he knew was coming.

Watching Fowl’s health bar while dodging to the side and swinging at the golem's leg again, Max saw it dip down about a fifth after taking a hit head-on with his shield.

“Elf tits!” Fowl cursed, having been smashed between the ground and the other golem’s attack.

The golem Max was fighting swung at him, its body apparently not having a front or back, its thick rock arm coming at his head. Dodging under it, he let himself smile.

These things are so slow…

Max went to work like a sculptor, repeatedly chipping away at the leg in the same spot. He easily dodged each of the golem’s attacks, and after about Max’s twentieth strike, the leg shattered, sending the golem to the ground.

Watching it flounder for a second, Max ran over to where Fowl was and started helping out with the golem trying to kill his dwarven friend.

Another twenty swings took off its leg, almost collapsing it on top of Fowl.

“Gods, are these even worth it?” Fowl asked as they started attacking the creature while it struggled to fight back.

After twelve minutes of attacks, both golems were dead. When they shattered the crystals inside their chest, it killed the golems immediately.

[2 Strength Consumed]

[2 Strength Consumed]

Wiping sweat from his forehead, Max shook his head in disbelief.

“These things are stronger than me… just what could their numbers be?”

“No one knows… well, no one but you,” Tanila replied, studying the shattered crystal in the golem's chest. “You can make a large amount of money if you ever sell your book on the stats of each monster.”

Looking at Tanila with shock, he heard his dwarven friends start to chuckle. “You all know?”

“Yes, we know. It was obvious you started writing them down weeks ago. It’s not a bad idea, actually.”

“Well, the good news is we know their constitution isn’t over sixty.”

Groaning, Fowl rolled his eyes. “I still can’t believe you don’t do more damage even with your improved weapons mastery.”

Glancing at Fowl, Max nodded before turning back to look at the crystal pieces Tanila was tapping.

“Any value in it?”

She nodded and pulled out a dagger, starting to pry the larger pieces out. “Sadly, most of these pieces are too small, but hopefully, one or two will be big enough.”

“Whenever you three are done chatting, there are still more enemies in the dungeon to fight. We have at least another hour or two before we will need to head back.”

Almost two hours later, ten more golems were destroyed; Fowl and Max were done with the speed at which they cleared the dungeon.

“The experience is good, even at this pace, but I just don’t see this being worth it anymore,” Fowl groaned as he rotated his shield shoulder. “Even a glancing blow from one of these things hurts worse than I want to admit.”

“Let’s finish getting these last two crystals and head back to Alexander,” Max said. “No doubt he is worried about us.”

Tanila poked Max as he dug out one of the crystals she had pointed at.

“Seems the ten strength points you gained today were well worth it on the last pack.”

Max nodded, carefully slipping the blade next to the rock and crystal fragments and gently tapping the handle to try and chip away the rock surrounding it.

Fowl cursed silently to himself about Max and his Strength gains while going over to where Batrire was standing and hugged her as they waited for Max and Tanila to finish up.

“You seem better,” Fowl whispered, holding her close.

Squeezing Fowl, ignoring the plate armor he wore that prevented her from actually feeling his skin, Batrire nodded. “I’m just worried about you. I’m not sure what I would have done if that had been you in the recovery room instead of me.”

“But it wasn’t, and we all know that had it happened with any other party, even a full party of five, they would have never made it back.”

Barely nodding, Batrire kissed Fowl’s bearded cheek. “I know.”

“Adventurer Seth, I’m glad to see the rumors were not true,” Merla said when she spotted them waiting to turn in a few quests. “I want you to know most did not believe but…” She paused and motioned around the room at the adventurers still staring at him, “as you can see, word travels fast, and lately, you have been the subject of much conversation.”

“So I have heard. Thank you again for all your help, Merla,” Max replied, bowing. “We are all grateful for your help with Batrire.”

“As an old healer, I’m glad to see you are well. Now, if you four will excuse me, I need to go and help a few others.”

Max moved to where the others were waiting for him after finishing turning in their daily quests.

“Good news!” exclaimed Tanila. “We ranked up!”

“What?” asked Max, looking bewildered at the new token on the counter with his name on it.

“Rank C now!” Fowl cheered happily. “Apparently, all the quests we have done and all the items we have turned in have earned bonus points.”

Max glanced at the dwarf attendant behind the counter and saw her smiling and bobbing her head. Her pink beard and hair caught him off guard, and he glanced at Batrire, who rolled her eyes when she noticed what he was staring at.

“Congratulations, Adventurer Seth,” the woman said as he picked up his golden token.

Giving her a nod, he studied it.

Something about this seems too easy…

116 - Trying New Things

[116 - Trying New Things - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

As the door to the private room shut, Max stared at the food Alexander had brought and set on their table.

“We aren’t paying this man enough,” he muttered, motioning to the food before them. “One of you three has to make him understand we need to pay for all this.”

Fowl was already chewing on a piece of meat while nodding in agreement.

“Eat, and let’s talk,” Batrire said, motioning to the plates of food before them. “I want to hear more about this being too easy.”

Sighing, Max nodded, picked up his tankard, and took a long drink.

“We shouldn’t have near enough points to hit Rank C yet. We just hit D, and now we are suddenly C? That doesn’t make sense.”

Tanila nodded. “The question is, who can make that happen and why?”

Having swallowed the massive bite of food, Fowl pointed a finger at Max and Tanila. “You’re both looking at things wrong. We are Rank C, and we should rejoice in that! However it happened, someone is looking out for us!”

Batrire shook her head at Fowl, who looked at her confused. “They are right, you fool. I’m not sure who made the four of us the next rank, but it puts us in a bad position by lowering our rewards.”

Everyone ate in silence as they mulled over what this could mean.

Leaning back in the chair, Max studied the empty plates stacked in front of Fowl. “You sure eat a lot for being the smallest person on this team.”

Snorting, Fowl grabbed his tankard and emptied it, releasing a massive belch before slamming the cup on the table.

“Wew… I feel better now!”

Waving her hand near her face, Batrire grimaced and scooted her chair back.

“Gods, that smells worse than usual.”

Chuckling, Fowl leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, “So what have we decided?”

“None of the possibilities add up,” Tanila answered.

Max nodded, having pointed that out earlier and listening to her complain.

“Regardless, nothing else changes. Tomorrow, we repeat the process. In a few days, we can get everyone to level thirty-five. From there, a few more dungeons will open up for us.”

Fowl grunted and stood up, moving to Batrire's chair and giving it a gentle tug. “Care to join me in the master suite?”

“Like you actually paid for it,” she replied, rolling her eyes but quickly hopping out of the chair.

“Aye, I paid for it. Unlike some who got arrested and thrown into jail, I’m the dwarf who obeys the law.”

Tanila laughed as Max held up a middle finger.

“You two don’t stay up too late,” Batrire said as she followed Fowl toward the door. “I would probably wait at least ten minutes before coming upstairs.”

Fowl turned around, his face and cheeks red.

“Maybe even just five minutes,” teased Tanila as the two left the room.

Lying in bed, Max closed his eyes, trying to will himself to the place where he could talk to whatever was inside him. No matter how hard he tried, he never succeeded.

Two days passed of challenging grinding out experience by killing the golems and dragonkin. At the end of the second day, Fowl, Tanila, and Batrire had managed to hit level thirty-five.

“Are we up for trying a new dungeon?” Max asked.

“I’m up for anything as long as we don’t have to fight any more golems,” Fowl grimaced.

“The guild has a warning about this dungeon being harder than most due to the centaurs’ speed,” Max stated. “Remember, they won’t engage like other enemies we usually face.”

Fowl grunted as he stayed closer to Tanila and Batrire. “So how are we going to do this?”

“We will figure it out. Our biggest strength comes from Tanila’s and my ability to ensnare or root things.”

The dungeon was a massive, flat area with short grass that shifted gently in the wind. A rare occasional tree rose up in the massively flat grassy plain. The top of the dungeon looked like a sunny day, with small clouds drifting across the sky.

Massive mountains encircled the entire floor, creating a bowl that seemed to encompass everything.

Ahead was a pack of three centaurs. One with a sword and shield, while the other two had bows and quivers of arrows. Each one was taller than a grown horse. Muscles rippled across their massive humanoid torso that connected to a horse's body.

“I can stealth in and maybe take out one, or at least disable it. Then Tanila can ensnare the back one.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Fowl said, rotating his shoulders as always before they started.

Attracting the centaur with the melee weapon was easy enough, but Fowl was initially surprised at how fast they were, even after Max had given a warning.

After the first attack on Fowl, the melee centaur attempted to dodge around him and head for both casters when it ran smack into an invisible wall of air. The stun from hitting it face-first allowed Fowl to swing solidly at its back leg while positioning himself for another attack.

Immediately, two arrows came flying from the archers aimed at Tanila, who dodged sideways as they approached.

Content to attack from a distance, neither noticed as Max approached from behind and took off both rear legs from the archer on the right.

The one on the left immediately started to run, turning its attention to Max, but vines grew underneath it, tangling its hooves.

Max ran forward, not wasting the moment, letting an arrow pierce his shoulder while swinging his halberd with all he had.

The cut went through the haunches of the centaur, cutting it cleanly in two.

With both archers out of commission and bleeding from their massive wounds, Max raced toward Fowl, who had managed to get a second attack on the same leg, limiting the centaur’s movement enough that it couldn’t focus on the casters behind him.

Two swings later, the warrior fell to the ground, cut in half by Max’s strikes.

“Holy elf tits,” muttered Fowl as he glanced at the corpse before him.

[Consume has Consumed a Higher Rank Skill]

[Archery - Common has been upgraded to Archery - Rare]

The cold wave hit him, and Max didn’t stumble as before. The effect from his upgraded Consume seemed to protect against it.

“Well, these centaurs don’t seem that tough,” Max stated, pointing at the three corpses. “I guess we can keep at this?”

“Most warriors also don't appear out of stealth and cut them in half either,” Tanila reminded Max as Fowl started cutting the mane off one of the centaurs.

“True, and I still had my spells in case we needed it.”

She nodded as Batrire bent down to inspect the hair Fowl had collected. “Seems weird, but I guess the weavers would want something like this.”

Packs of four and five fell with little trouble as the combined spells of Max and Tanila kept the runners in place, and Fowl managed to protect Batrire and Talina.

“Think we can take six?”

Max glanced at Fowl and grimaced. “I’d rather not. Even if I get one from the start, that leaves three archers free. Last time that one was a pain while it ran around before we could land an ensnare on it.”

“So we’re done then?”

“For today, with this dungeon, sure. We still have two others we can attempt if you want.”

“Not the spider one,” Batrire said, a noticeable look of fear on her face as she squirmed where she stood.

“Alright, on to the ape one then.”

The moment they portaled into the ape dungeon, the humidity and heat of the floor hit them. Water seemed to coat their skin within seconds, and the ground was slightly squishy from the air's moisture.

Massive jungle trees with vines running everywhere filled the zone around them, and Max couldn’t help but groan as he saw the thick brush that would need clearing to get through.

“This seems worse than the centaur one,” Tanila said as she pulled at her robe to keep it from sticking to her chest. “Are we sure this one was supposed to be easier?”

Laughing, Max shook his head. “I didn’t say easier. I said different. None of these are considered easy.”

“Let’s just try one and see what happens,” Fowl said, motioning at a path that seemed to lead through the underbrush and trees.

“Warrior’s first,” Batrire said, motioning for Max or Fowl to lead.

“Incoming!”

Max didn’t have time to activate stealth as three massive gorillas, each over ten feet tall and wearing plate armor, fell from the tree tops above them.

Their path was a perfect ambush spot for an attack from above.

With Fowl at the back, both casters were trapped between the two warriors.

“Freezing!”

Tanila didn’t hesitate to cast her ice prison on the one that dropped in the middle near them, stopping it a few meters from where the two of them stood.

The other two gorillas roared and charged, colliding with Max and Fowl.

Both pulled massive clubs from their backs and unleashed a flurry of blows that sounded like a gong as they impacted against the warrior’s shield.

“Rooting!”

Max parried and blocked, struggling with hits from the gorilla's massive attack, unable to land any real attacks of his own.

Large roots came from the ground, grabbing at the gorilla’s feet. As they did, it didn’t hesitate, ignoring Max momentarily. It started swinging at the roots that were binding it.

“They are smart!” Max shouted as he stepped back, put away his shield, and swung with his halberd at the gorilla’s side.

[Power Strike]

The beast tried to parry the attack, but with the added strength from the skill, it sliced through the club and tore through the creature’s chest.

The gorilla roared for a moment before falling backward, its torso sliced in half, spraying blood everywhere.

[2 Strength Consumed]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Skill does not match beings body type]

[Consume is adjusting skill]

[Would you like to learn [Intimidation]?]

[Yes / No]

Max selected yes, thankful when he didn’t stumble as the skill flowed through his mind. Max turned, looking at the gorilla locked in the ice, and saw it still frozen solid.

“I’m coming!” he shouted, running behind the creature and activating Stealth.

Using both hands, Max drove the tip of the halberd into the beast's skull, right under the base of the plate helm it wore, killing it with one strike.

[2 Strength Consumed]

Grinning, Max raced to where Fowl was suffering under a consecutive rain of blows. His plate armor was taking the hits well, but the strikes Fowl landed did minor damage compared to what the gorilla did.

Ten yards from Fowl, Max saw the gorilla open its mouth and roar.

A wave of unknown force assaulted his mind, causing him to pause for half a second.

Fowl froze as the skill hit him, unable to block the subsequent attacks that rained down on his head and shoulders, knocking him to the ground.

Both Tanila and Batrire appeared unaffected, resisting the skill as Max had. Thankfully, Batrire was able to heal the injuries Fowl was sustaining as Tanila threw up a stone wall, blocking the attacks for a moment.

Suddenly, the gorilla leaped over the stone wall and came at Tanila, almost covering the distance in one jump.

A wall of air caught it in the chest, and as it slid off it toward the ground, Max spun, delivering a massive blow to the gorilla’s left side.

It roared and turned, limping from the almost five-inch deep gash.

Casting ensnare, Max watched as the roots came up from the ground. They were not as thick as Tanila’s but were still doing their job and held the beast in place.

It was unable to move and struggled to stay standing. Max ran behind it, using its limited movement to his advantage, and hacked and stabbed at the creature until he severed its spinal column near its legs.

The roars it let out as it fell echoed through the jungle, and a few new ones responded moments later.

“That’s bad!” Tanila exclaimed.

Nodding, Max pointed back in the direction they had come. “You two go! I got Fowl!”

Max sighed as the two women ran past him, ignoring the dying gorilla and dashing to where Fowl was starting to come around.

Grabbing his dwarven ally by the back of his plate armor, Max hoisted him up and threw him over his shoulder as he ran along the path they had just come.

Behind them, the jungle echoed with roars that matched the one the crippled gorilla had made.

Everyone was panting when they returned to the portal, the sounds of the gorillas having died down.

“Put me down!” Fowl shouted, kicking lightly at Max, who set him on the ground.

“Now you know how I felt,” Batrire said, chuckling at Fowl as he took a moment to get situated.

“Outside, now!” snapped Tanila as some of the trees off in the distance seemed to be shaking.

No one argued as everyone raced into the portal.

117 - Golden Axet

[117 - Golden Axe - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“Gods, that was awful,” groaned Fowl as he took his helmet off and stored it. “It was like my brain shut off for a moment. All I remember was something pounding my chest over and over, and then the next thing I knew, Seth had me over his shoulder like a sack of flour.”

“I’m guessing that is a no for now,” Max said, looking at the portal they had just exited. “I didn’t expect it to be anywhere near that difficult.”

“The creatures are getting smarter, that is for sure,” added Tanila. “How they dropped out of the trees and surrounded us proves it. If there had been four…”

Everyone nodded as she trailed off.

“No chance we can find a fifth party member, can we?”

Batrire glanced at Max and saw the smirk on his face as he asked that question. “Somehow, I doubt it would solve our problem if we did.”

He nodded and pulled out a sheet of paper from his storage. “The only other dungeon in this area of town for us to try would be the spider one…”

No one said anything for a moment after he stopped talking, each of them seeing the look on Batrire's face at the idea of dealing with a poison-based creature.

"Or we can take a day and go visit with the Golden Axe Faction and see what we think about them. It is going to be time for that soon."

Grunting, Fowl bobbed his head.

Riding a carriage into the inner city, Max considered what he knew about Dexic and her Faction.

He had done some research and knew they would have to choose soon. The next ten levels were considered some of the toughest as the dynamics and resistances of the monsters and creatures changed. They still needed to fight and kill the bosses of the previous dungeons, but it was time to plan for the future, and everything started here.

"Gods, these people act like gold is as common as water," mumbled Fowl as they rode up to the gate for the Faction.

Each of the twelve factions had a property within the central part of the city. Each one was set at a different position around the outer edge near the water. Twelve houses, each equally spaced around the city so that if a need arose, a group would always be ready to respond to the call.

The Golden Axe Faction had twenty-foot-high walls with gold decorations inlaid along the outside of the property, and at the entrance stood three statues that shone in the sun. An elf, dwarf, and human statue, each outfitted with golden armor and holding a massive golden axe, watched all those who entered their home.

The wooden doors had a pair of crossed golden axes on both sides.

"Rumor is that the Lightning Brotherhood has lightning arcing around the gates," Tanila said. "Each of the Factions likes to make sure you know how powerful they are."

Nodding, Max waited for Batrire to get out of the carriage. He saw the four guards watching them as they prepared to move toward the gates.

"Welcome, adventurers, to the Golden Axe. I am Biscuit. How can I help you?"

Fowl coughed, and Max heard Batrire grunt at him.

Biscuit was a stocky dwarf, wearing golden armor just like Dexic had, and his beard was white, even though it was apparent he couldn't be that old.

"I am Seth Pendal, and these are my party members, Batrire, Fowl, and Tanila. Dexic gave me this card to come by and visit her faction as we get closer to the level of choosing where to call home."

A wide smile covered the dwarf's face as he bobbed his head and reached out, taking the card Max held out for him. Glancing at it briefly, the dwarf snapped his fingers, and an elven woman moved forward to where they were standing.

“Welcome! I had hoped you four might come. Dexic has spoken highly of you. If you would like, Isarrel will show you around the property. Sadly, Dexic isn’t here as she is currently in the tower with a few other members.”

Max knew his eyes betrayed him as they went wide momentarily and saw a twinkle in Biscuit’s eye.

“Tower teams go out occasionally, and when they do, it can often be for weeks or sometimes even longer than that. No worries. When she returns, I am sure she will search you out and be happy to answer any questions you might have.”

Isarrel moved forward, her blond hair braid laying over the golden chain mail armor she wore.

“If you four would follow me, I would happily show you the property and share a little history about our Faction.”

“Our Faction is one of the older ones in the capital, over one thousand years old. Only a few others are older, as many have risen and fallen for different reasons.”

As Isarrel walked, she continued talking and pointing out different parts of the property. She had already shown them the outside training area where ten members were actively dueling each other.

The speed and ferocity of their movements were beyond belief, and Max realized that at least half of them were above level fifty.

“Daily, we offer sparring matches with different instructors and provide a multitude of obstacle courses for our members to practice on. One of the hardest parts of the tower is that one never knows what they will encounter. We have certain floors mapped out, but occasionally, the tower will change a floor, and when it does, everything you think you knew is old news.”

Max nodded, watching two women with swords and shields moving at speeds that made it hard for him to follow. The sounds of their blades against the shields and weapons rang out across the courtyard.

“How high are they?” Fowl asked, not ashamed in the least to ask a question most wouldn’t dare.

Smiling, Isarrel chuckled before pointing at the human woman with a chain helmet. “Grace is one of our members from another part of the world. She is above level sixty and amazing when it comes to tactics some might not appreciate.”

As Isarrel spoke, Grace spun, kicking her foot at the shield of the woman she was dueling. In the same movement, Max saw her grab a handful of dirt from the ground, her sword vanishing into her dimensional storage. As she spun, the dirt flew at her opponent, and the second it was gone from her hand, her sword was back out, coming at the woman.

A kick came from Grace the moment her sword connected with the other woman’s, striking her opponent's knee and sending the woman crashing to the ground.

Grace's shield flashed, and she darted forward. A charge attack came a second after the woman was put out of position, sending her flying backward as their shields connected, tumbling across the field.

So much power here… imagine the possibilities…

Max shuddered, the hunger he hadn't felt in a while suddenly roaring to life.

Isarrel saw his body shake and smiled, thinking he was nervous at the power being demonstrated.

She whistled, getting the attention of the duelists, and motioned to Grace, who nodded and gave a bow toward her partner, who had stood up and was dusting herself off.

Grace walked toward them, one moment covered in chain armor and the next, wearing leather clothes. Her black skin glistened with a sheen of sweat from the workout. Even more impressive was the fact she stood almost seven feet tall.

"Grace, come meet some possible new recruits!" Isarrel shouted, using her hands to motion toward Max and the others.

Smiling, Grace quickly jogged over and gave a slight nod of her head. "Welcome to the Golden Axe. Are you all in the same group?"

Max bobbed his head, picking up the slight hint of a twang in her voice. "We are. Dexic invited us. That was… impressive."

The woman smiled even more and winked at Isarrel. "She is not being honest. I was actually training her, so it looks like I'm better than I really am."

Fowl stood there, mouth slightly open, and stared up at the woman. "Gods, you are tall."

A hearty laugh came from the warrior as she nodded. "And you are short my dwarven friend, but I won't point that out."

Red color filled Fowl's cheeks when he realized he had spoken out loud.

"Forgive him," Batrire said with a groan. "We still haven't housebroken him yet. You are from across the sea?"

A flask of water appeared in her hand. Grace nodded before taking a drink and putting the water away. "I am. I have been here about a year and am excited to be a part of this Faction and the constant climbing they do in the tower. I am glad that–"

A whistle came from the woman she had sent flying, and Grace rolled her eyes and shrugged. "Forgive me, my time is up. I need to get back to training. I wish you four the best of luck choosing a home. This one is rather great, I believe."

The warrior waved at them as she ran back to her training partner, armor and weapon reappearing instantly.

"I really need one of those," muttered Max as Grace immediately started attacking the other woman.

“They are acquired once most reach the tower,” Isarrel said as she motioned for them to follow her inside the main house. “One of the perks of being an adventurer for our Faction is that we want you always to be prepared to fight.”

The inside of the house was just as impressive. It was four stories tall and had multiple wings for housing, studies, crafting, and more.

“We do everything we can inside the Faction, as all do, to help cut down on costs while also keeping certain secrets within our walls,” Isarrel stated as she pointed down a hallway. “Down here is where many of our different crafters spend time working on new things and mastering old ones.”

“Can I ask what level most of your crafters are?”

Isarrel turned and looked at Fowl, who continued to be unconcerned at asking questions whenever something popped into his head.

“That is a tricky question,” she replied, taking a deep breath. “The truth is, leveling a crafter is hard work. As I’m sure you all know, leveling is hard. We can’t take lower-level crafters through easy dungeons as they would get no experience. This means paying someone to help get them experience early on. The few that can hit level thirty are much easier to bring along, but even then, you four must know how hard it is to fight with only four people.”

Max nodded without realizing it.

“Have you four considered finding a fifth teammate?”

That question seemed so easy to answer, yet the four of them looked at each other, almost confused for a moment.

“We have,” Tanila replied. “It is hard to find someone we all feel would work well and not mess up our balance. Sometimes we wished for another, yet the experience we gain with just the four of us is rather nice.”

Motioning for them to continue walking, Isarrel led them upstairs and didn’t bother pushing the question further.

“I heard that you will have a chance to meet the Faction head. Dexic’s recommendation apparently carried more weight than I had anticipated.”

Max glanced at the other three, who all seemed shocked as well. None of them had expected to meet any of the heads of a Faction until they actually committed to one.

“It seems word of your deeds in the dungeon, as well as in the arena, has reached his ears,” Isarrel said, motioning at a pair of massive doors down the hall from the stairs that had come up. “Just know, I can only think of a few other times he has met with someone before they committed to join.”

Tanila leaned over and elbowed Max gently. “You know we will blame you for this if things go bad.”

Max nodded, ignoring Batrire’s laugh.

“Look at those doors,” muttered Fowl.

Up ahead stood two massive ten-foot doors, each with an actual golden axe set into the wood.

Isarrel led them to the doors and knocked. A sound from inside had her turn and give them a wink. “Good luck, you four!”

118 - A Contract In Blood

[118 - A Contract In Blood - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

The trophies that lined the massive room caught everyone’s attention as the door swung open. Skulls, tusks, teeth, weapons, armor, and more lined shelves, walls, floor space, and even the ceiling. Everywhere was something that seemed rare and valuable, yet in this room, it was hard to decide what was most exotic.

At the far end of the room was a set of three couches with a small end table with some cups sitting on it. Standing before the middle couch was an older man, white hair slicked back and a smile on his face as he stood in black clothes that shimmered slightly as he moved.

“Welcome!” the man said, beckoning them to come toward him while Isarrel motioned them to continue walking, then shut the door behind them.

“Holy elf tits,” Fowl whispered to Max. “The stuff in here…”

Doing his best to not look like a country bumpkin, Max bobbed his head slightly and strode ahead of the others.

“Seth Pendal, sir.”

The faction head nodded, holding out his hand to shake Max’s before turning to shake everyone else's.

“I am Everett. Welcome to the Gold Axe Faction. Please sit and allow me to pour you all something to drink.”

The man motioned to the couches they were standing near, and they all sat down, amazed at how soft and yet supportive the fabric felt.

“This is Muhana fur,” Tanila said as she ran her hand over it.

Max looked at Tanila, confused.

“Ahh, you know what this is,” Everett said, a smirk touching the corner of his lips. He chuckled momentarily as he poured dark liquid into their cups instead. “Should I ask if you know what this is?”

Tanila waited till Everett handed her a cup and took a small sip after smelling it. “Coffee, but not just any coffee… it is from the jungle area to the east of the elven kingdom.”

Snorting slightly, the older man nodded and sat down. He picked up his cup and took a sip before letting out a sigh.

“Should I ask how you know that?”

Tanila realized she had given away more information than she probably should have and did her best not to let on that she hadn’t meant to. “I have parents who enjoyed the finer things. Some might say they weren’t excited I chose the path I have, but each of us pursues our own life.”

Everett nodded, seeming to accept the answer she gave. “And two dwarves. Rumor has it that both of you are also from the dwarven capital. May Ockrim always guide your hammer.”

Fowl grinned and gave a slight nod of his head.

“So tell me, what do you four think of our Faction house?” Everett asked as he leaned back against the couch, holding his steaming cup of coffee in one hand.

“It is impressive, and we are grateful for this opportunity to meet you,” Max said, motioning to his friends. “Can I ask why you invited us to meet you personally? We know that isn’t something that happens often.”

Taking another drink, Everett smiled after swallowing as he stared at Max. “You have caught Dexic’s eye, and I trust her judgment. After the way you proved yourself in the arena and that rumor about some elves, I figured I needed to meet the party you were part of.”

“Well, I need to make sure you understand we are a package,” Max said, motioning to the others. “We are a family trying to find a place for all of us.”

“Oh, don’t worry about us not happily taking the entire group. In fact, I prefer a group that has been together over a random one. Most of the time, they have learned how to fight together and have fewer issues when shite goes bad.” Everett leaned forward, setting his cup down on the table. Reclining back, he intertwined his fingers and tapped his thumbs together. “I think you would find most Factions will be interested in you. As you choose which path to go down, just know that the major differences will be how you mesh with those inside the house. I would encourage you to go and visit the others. See who might feel like a good fit.”

Fowl’s eyebrows drew together as he listened to Everett. “Are you saying you want us to go and check out the other Factions?”

“I’m saying, after you go and see what the others have to offer, we will be here, happy to accept you, and we won’t put some crazy request for admittance. I would even be willing to discuss reducing some early costs to help you four progress faster.”

Tanila scooted to the edge of her seat and leaned closer to the Faction leader. “How much are you talking?”

A devilish grin made a few wrinkles appear as Everett held Tanila’s gaze. “I would consider reducing up to one-third of the normal costs for the first year in the Faction.”

“One-half for the first three years,” Tanila replied almost immediately, her voice steady.

A slight cough came from Everett, and he shook his head. “I could do maybe one-third for three years.”

“One-half for the first two years and one-third for the third year.”

Max sat there, unsure how much they were talking about cost-wise, but he had some idea that it would be a lot if Tanila was having this kind of discussion with Everett.

“I could perhaps do one half for the first year, but there is no way I could do it for two years.”

Max saw that Everett looked calm, as if these negotiations with Tanila were nothing more than writing a list for the market.

“What if I said we would agree to join the Golden Axe Faction today if we got two years of one-half and one year of one-third dues?”

A noticeable twitch took place along Everett’s right eye for the briefest moments, but Max caught it.

A small grunt came from Fowl, but Batrire put her hand on his knee, and the warrior remained silent.

“You would sign today?” Everett asked, his voice slow and steady.

“For the terms I just mentioned, we would.”

A few moments of silence hung in the room before Everett’s head slowly began to bob. “I could be persuaded to sign for that. Are we starting the first year from today?”

“Let’s start it when we hit level forty. I also know we can get assistance from some Faction members to help with different dungeons.”

Lifting his hand to his face, Everett stroked his chin, even though not an ounce of hair was on it. Smiling, he stood up and extended a hand toward Tanila.

“I am interested in knowing who your parents are. You negotiate well.”

Max noticed a slight crimson blush on his elf friend's cheeks as she stood up and shook Everett’s hand.

“Maybe one day I’ll tell you. For now, let’s just say I learned a lot of lessons the hard way. Sometimes parents can be difficult to negotiate with, especially when they think they hold all the cards.”

Roaring with laughter, Everett nodded and moved around the couch he had been sitting on and over to a lamp. Pushing it sightly, a desk came out of a bookshelf at the back of the room, sliding toward him.

Max sat there stunned to see what had just happened.

“Are you sure?” Max whispered as he watched Everett walk to the desk and pull a metal tablet out of the drawer.

“Yes… he wants us and tipped his hand. As such, we won’t be able to get any other deal like what he gave up… trust me.”

Returning to the group, Everett held out the metal tablet and produced a small knife. “In case one or two of you don’t know how this works, this is a signing tablet. Each of

you will put a small drop of blood on the tablet, as will I. The system will bind us together with the Faction. It will provide access to specific locations and allow you to be recognized by those within the Faction.

“One of the great perks is being able to spar with other Faction members anywhere without being in a dueling field. No need to constantly sign an intent to fight. There are also other perks, such as the raid feature, and we can equip you with communication bracelets when you reach the tower. They only work between the Faction they are bound to. Any questions?”

Max glanced at Fowl, who was already standing up and holding out his hand.

“I’ll pledge first if that is ok?”

Everett nodded and handed Fowl the knife. A simple prick caused his thumb to bleed, and he pressed it against the metal.

Glancing down, the older man nodded and smiled. “Fowl Hammerfall… that is a dwarven name if I have ever heard of one.”

“Bah, it’s a blessing and a curse,” grumbled Fowl. “I come from a line of smiths. I can’t say they are excited I’m out here doing this, but Ockrim gave me the skills, and I’m going to use them.”

Waving his hand as an acknowledgment of that statement, Everett turned to Batrire and watched as she took the dagger from Fowl and repeated the process.

“Batrire Lightbrew,” Everett said as he read the name. “A perfect name for a healer.”

Max began using his skill, changing things in his status to be where he felt they needed to be. He was unsure what exactly was shown on the tablet.

Tanila reached over and took the knife from her friend, then pricked her thumb, smiling as she placed her finger against the metal plate and watching it glow slightly before fading.

Everett’s eyes widened slightly, and Max realized that none of the other two had had that happen.

“Tanila… and no last name… how in the–”

“It was something I used when I struck out on my own. Not to be bound by my family or worry about bringing them any dishonor.”

Everett saw the steady gaze that Tanila had as she smiled at him, her confidence not wavering once. “Very well… I must say I have only seen this one other time…” Chuckling for a second, he shook his head and looked at Max, who was taking the dagger from Tanila. “I must say I’m more excited about what shows up when you sign more than the others.”

Max hesitated, the knife just a few inches from his thumb. “I’m sorry. Why are you that interested?”

Unable to hold back, Everett started to laugh, letting his voice carry around the room. “Seth Pendal? The hero Seth Pendal is a name many have claimed, yet few have had parents who named them that. Dexic even told me that you use a spear just like the

hero of old did. Then, after witnessing what took place in the Colosseum and how you handled your halberd, I can only imagine how skilled you must be."

Everett motioned at the other three in the room and shook his head slightly. "Two dwarves and an elf who has used something to block her last name, all traveling with a male warrior that seems to have captured the rare interest of one of my best members… forgive me if that doesn't seem too good to be true."

"What would you do if something other than Seth Pendal showed up?" Max asked as he began to prick his finger, blood seeping from where the knife cut the skin.

"Nothing," Everett replied with a smile. "The name doesn't matter. It's the person behind it that is more important."

Nodding, Max leaned over, pressed his thumb against the cold metal plate, and then pulled it back. The plate glowed, somewhat similar to how it had with Tanila.

Everett's eyes closed slightly as he read what was displayed.

"Huh…"

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

It's been a while since I mentioned the Patreon side of things.

Currently at chapter 136 for UL1 - Also - Has 1 other story hitting RR April first and a sneak peek at the new story I'm working on!

Just in case you wanna read ;)

119 - Ogre Nuts

119 - Ogre Nuts - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

"I guess your parents really wanted you to be like the hero of old," Everett said, shaking his head before holding out his hand and waiting for the knife.

All Max could do was take a deep breath and laugh, trying to not draw attention to how concerned he had been about what might show up.

Everett deftly cut his thumb and put it on the metal plate, a green light shimmering as each of the four felt a slight shock against the thumb they had cut.

"And just like that, I welcome you to the Golden Axe Faction!"

Putting the knife and tablet in storage, Everett shook each of their hands again, beaming with excitement at what had just happened. "I'll make sure to notify all of the officers within the faction so they are aware of your status. Just know that until you reach level forty and we officially start your time, you will not be considered official members in the eyes of those outside this place."

"That means we can come here to train or get things crafted?" Max asked.

“Yes!” exclaimed Everett, pulling out a small book and handing it to Max before repeating the process with Tanila and Batrire. When he offered one to Fowl, the dwarf shook his head.

“No, thank you, sir. I’ll let them tell me what it says. I prefer to read the back of my eyelids instead of pages.”

Shrugging, Everett put the fourth book back into storage. “Those will tell you what is expected of you and everything about us. It will detail how to handle requests for crafted items and the expected dues based on what you gather while taking part in Faction raids.”

Max nodded as he quickly scanned through the book, noticing the table of contents, which was a godsend. “Can I ask one question about reagents for crafting?”

Everett’s whole body shook slightly from side to side as the older man looked ready to move on to his plans for the day. “Something specific that wouldn’t be in the book?”

“I doubt it,” Max replied. “It has to do with items from rare spawns within the dungeon. Does the Faction reward extra for them, and do you truly keep it a secret like I have heard?”

The need to pursue other obligations seemed to end as Everett turned and gave his complete attention to Max, who was smiling. He noticed the other members of Max’s party had shifted slightly as he spoke.

“Are you saying you have some rare spawn items on you? It’s not unheard of, but something tells me you know that… what am I missing?”

Max glanced at Tanila, who gave him a slight nod.

“We have had a few encounters with rare spawns and would need somewhere a little better prepared for such items than your table or office. An alchemist, Tang Mu, he–”

Coughing, Everett held up his hand and cut Max off. “You met Tang Mu?!”

“We did… he made a potion for Batrire after a fight with a rare scorpion spawn almost killed her. We had to give up–”

“Wait!” Everett said, grabbing his coffee and quickly finishing it before motioning to the door they had come in. “Tell me when we get to a room where I can actually see what, I can only imagine, will cause some excitement among our crafters.”

“You sure this was a good idea?” Fowl asked as the four of them stood on one side of a table, and an assortment of humans, elves, and dwarves funneled into a room that was obviously used for harvesting materials and reagents. It had a clean smell, but it was nothing like Tang Mu’s room.

Everett glanced around the room as a female elf entered, and she motioned to him with her hand.

“Sorry for the commotion, but if you have what I you have, I would rather let everyone see it and decide how best to use it. Of course, we will gladly purchase it at a fair price based on the standard Faction value system.”

Max nodded and motioned to Fowl, who groaned. He pulled out a pair of gloves from storage and slipped them on, earning a few chuckles and nods of respect from those in the room. The dwarf then pulled out his sack of reagents and put the massive tail they had cut off the boss on the table.

Curses that involved *'elf tits'* and '*dwarf balls*,' as well as a few other harsher ones, came across the room as a few people moved toward it until someone in the crowd cleared their throat, and everyone took a step back.

An older female elf shook her head. "This is very impressive. Are you sure the four of you want to sell this to the Faction? I have no doubt that Tang Mu mentioned how valuable something like this might be."

Giving a shrug, Fowl nodded and then pulled out another sack from within the backpack. He put it on the table and reached in, grimacing as he did, before setting the ogre balls they had taken from the rare dungeon on the table.

More curses came, and Max saw Everett's eyes go wide.

"How many…" The female elf paused, coughing and adjusting her voice as her eyes conveyed her surprise at what was before her. "Are those…"

Fowl grunted. "I'm afraid they are… black ogre balls… I think we have close to forty of them in here…"

A gasp and murmur rose up from everyone as Everett moved quickly to where the elven woman was and whispered in her ear. She nodded, and the Faction leader moved to the front of the table, then turned to face the crowd of crafters, who looked like they might soon start excitedly foaming at the mouth.

"Alfreda and I think you should all head back and start to draw up ideas on how you might use some of these items."

A groan and some complaints came, but they were quickly cut off when Alfreda turned her face and stared them down.

"Go and make a list. We will decide from there, based on who has earned the right and who has the best ideas."

Everyone stood for a moment until Everett motioned with his head to the door, and then they quickly took off, almost racing to leave the room and start their lists.

"Ok, I gotta ask," Fowl said after the crafters left, and only Everett and Alfreda remained. "What good are these ogre nuts I've been packing around for a while?"

The elven woman started to laugh softly. It was so light and warm that it was apparent she enjoyed Fowl's question. "There are lots of things they can make. Some of the best items are temporary strength and constitution potions as well as a few other performance-enhancing ones."

"Performan–"

Batrire elbowed Fowl in the side, shaking her head.

"Yes, those sell well…" Alfreda replied, winking at Batrire, who was rolling her eyes at Fowl. "Should I dare ask if there are any more items?"

Tanila tapped Max's arm and nodded. "This is our family now. We have to trust them."

Max sighed and reached into storage, pulling out a backpack and a pair of gloves.

He paused as he set the pack on the counter and looked at Everett and Alfreda, who seemed almost unable to hold back their excitement at what he might produce next.

"Before I show you these things, I need your word that no one will know where they came from."

Everett's eyes narrowed, but he nodded without hesitation. "When you say it like that, I can only imagine why… but the Faction family always comes first."

Reaching into the backpack, Max pulled out one of the heads of the three-headed ogre, and when he reached back in and started to pull out the second one, Alfreda appeared to almost lose strength in her knees for a second.

"Boy, if you pull out a third–"

"I can't," Max said, finishing the task of depositing the massive heads on the counter.

Alfreda let out a sigh of relief. "Ok, because if you three managed to kill that beast, I would–"

"I can't produce the third head," Max said, interrupting the older elf, "because it disappeared before we could cut it off."

Alfreda staggered to the table before catching herself on it, turning to look at Everett, whose mouth opened slightly. It wasn't fully open, but it was enough evidence to show the man was impressed.

"You four killed a three-headed ogre?" he asked, his voice low and quiet.

"Perhaps we should ask for five years at a discount?" Tanila replied, winking at Everett, who was shaking his head in disbelief.

Max and Fowl continued to pull out all of the other materials they had been saving, including some pieces they had taken from the giant skeleton and mimic.

The stone table was almost covered in miscellaneous scales, hides, organs, and more.

"I haven't seen anything like this in over fifty years," Alfreda said as she carefully inspected some of the items with her gloved hands. "What we have here is…"

She trailed off, checking everything while Everett glanced at Max and the others.

"How?"

"Can you be more specific?" Tanila asked as Everett stared at them.

"How did you come across these things?" he asked, pointing at the sack of testicles and the two heads. "That shouldn't happen, especially at your level."

Each of them looked at the others and shrugged.

“The portal was purple, and every ogre was two-headed and black. There was no exit. We had to fight our way out.”

“Why would you go in? I mean, surely you knew it had to be dangerous!”

Fowl laughed and nodded. “We wouldn’t be adventurers if we didn’t take a risk. We might have almost died, but it was worth it.”

They all smiled, chuckling and nodding as Everett shook his head again in disbelief at the group before him. “You all are crazy, aren’t you?”

“In a good way,” Tanila said, her grin growing by the second. “Each of us trusts the others. We all know what each of us can do, and that allows us to not have to worry too often. Sure, things go sideways, but we don’t panic and fight as we know how to.”

“Everett, ignore them a moment and come here,” Alfreda said as she poked one of the heads with a metal rod. “This skin and the texture… do you have any idea what this can do?”

The Faction leader moved to where the older elf stood and watched as she poked and prodded a few sections of the face.

They whispered to each other, and Fowl leaned over, trying to hear.

“Care to share what is going on with us?”

Everett glanced at Fowl and winced. “Sorry… this is a very rare spawn, and rumor is that the brain inside each can do some amazing things. I’m unsure if we have the other required ingredients or crafting levels to handle these.”

“So, want us to hold onto them?” joked Fowl.

“Uh, no, I think we can manage to keep these safe until we can find the best use for them if you four don’t mind,” replied Everett, grinning at Fowl. “I do, however, think I’ll have to figure out how to handle a turn-in like this… it goes way beyond anything most would dream of, even in the tower.”

Tanila moved around the table and held her hand out to Everett. “I’m sure you’ll figure out something that works for all of us. In the meantime, we must get some potions and head back to our inn.”

Alfreda approached Tanila, pulled out a box from her storage, and lifted the lid. Inside were two rows of healing potions that were slightly bigger and had a darker color to them than usual.

“Those are high-grade potions,” Tanila muttered, reaching out and running a finger over the glass.

“They are, my dear, and you four have earned them. Take one each.”

Without hesitation, Tanila took one and put it in storage before motioning for the others to come and get one.

After the four had left and the door was shut, Everett turned to Alfreda and held out both hands with a questioning look.

“Tell me I’m not dreaming… tell me that table is really filled with what I think.”

Alfreda started to cackle, her laughter echoing off the stone walls.

“Everett, my dear, I don’t think I could have ever imagined seeing anything close to what these young ones have brought… you better keep them happy and take care of them. If the gods have blessed them like this already, I can only imagine what they might bring in down the road.”

Everett nodded, muttering to himself and watching as Alfreda stored everything in her dimensional pocket.

“Who the hell are those adventurers?” Everett asked out loud as he walked to the door.

“A gift,” Alfreda replied, knowing he hadn’t expected an honest answer.

120 - Storing Power

[120 - Storing Power - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“I’m glad that worked out,” Max declared as he leaned back against the carriage they had rented to take them back to the inn. “I was a bit nervous when you told them we would commit today, but that discount sounds amazing.”

Tanila chuckled slightly as she agreed. “The fact that he met us told me he would negotiate, and we will come way ahead by not having to give as much back to the Faction. Especially when we are in the tower.”

“How much does one normally give?” Max asked.

“It’s usually twenty percent of whatever you collect,” Fowl answered, not opening his eyes as he leaned against the carriage's wall. “Tanila is right. It will be a massive gain for us, only having to give ten percent for two years. At the speed at which we progress… well, it will be a lot.”

“I’m surprised you offered him those items so quickly,” Max said as he nudged Fowl with his foot. “I wasn’t sure if you would at first.”

Opening just one eye, Fowl rolled it. “It’s our home now. Factions work differently than even the adventurers guild. To hold those back would do us no good. As Tanila pointed out, the points we earned by turning those in today will have them begging to help us level faster.”

“Which means tomorrow we are going to do what?”

Max and Tanila looked at Batrire, who was rubbing her left arm with her right hand.

“I guess we will go and kill all the bosses for the dungeons we don’t farm anymore. Hopefully, we can get a few good drops, and the experience they give should be worth that grind.”

Batrire nodded, squeezing her arm slightly.

“But we don’t need to do the scorpion one,” Tanila said. “I’m not sure I want to ever go back in there.”

Max saw Batrire let out the breath she had been holding in, and Tanila leaned over and squeezed her knee.

“I guess that means a good meal, a solid night's rest, and then tomorrow morning we go at first light?” Max asked.

“Sounds good to me,” Fowl muttered. “But a nap now sounds even better.”

After grunting, Batrire elbowed her partner and leaned against him, letting him wrap his arm around her as they rode back to the inn.

Max glanced at Tanila, sitting beside him, smiling as she watched Fowl and Batrire relax together.

“You can lean against me if you want,” he whispered, motioning to his shoulder.

A slight redness filled Tanila’s cheek for a moment before she smiled and lay her head against the shoulder he offered.

“I got it!”

Max let Fowl handle the dragonkin boss and focused on the two warriors with it. With his new rank in Weapons Master and where his stats were now, killing them was only a one or two-hit process.

“One more!” he shouted, taking down the rooted warrior in a single strike. His axe blade cut through its skin without any issues now, carving through bone like they were sticks.

Fowl was standing strong against the boss even though it towered over him by almost five feet.

It had a shield and carried a massive sword, but nothing it threw at Fowl made it past the dwarven warrior's defenses.

Its tail whipped around, coming in to strike as part of a combo attack with its sword and shield, but Tanila summoned a wall of air, causing it to stop and allowing the dwarf to land a hit against its leg.

Spinning back around, its sword glowed, chopping at Fowl, who braced for the attack's impact. It drove the dwarf to his knees, but Max was behind it before it could make a second attack.

[Power Strike]

His axe head cut clean through the boss's stomach, sending its top half crashing to the ground.

Another strike to its neck cut its head off, and Max didn’t waste time grabbing the head and storing it while also cutting off the tail.

[Consume has Consumed an Ability]

[Ability Rank is lower than Current Rank]

[Power Stored for Future Use]

Max sighed, shaking his head.

“Nothing?”

“Says the power is stored for future use… that has happened a few times lately.”

Grunting, Fowl stood up and stretched, the heals from Batrire taking away his injury from the boss’s blow.

“And your skill still says nothing new?” Fowl asked, even though he already knew the answer.

[Skill Description - Consume]

*****

Consume - Epic Skill: When killing a person, creature, or monster, the skill holder has a chance to consume some of the essence of the one defeated. Health, Stamina, Mana, Stats, and Skills have a chance of being gained. Stats cannot be consumed if current stats are higher. Skills can be upgraded if a higher-rank skill is consumed. No experience may be gained by killing creatures or others. No experience is gained via quests. The power of skills and abilities consumed may be stored for future growth.

*****

“Just that power can be stored. I’m not sure how it works, and it has been quiet on the discussion front lately.”

Grunting, Fowl moved to the boss and grabbed its sword, knowing it would dissolve if he didn’t get it in time.

“That is still a chunk of experience,” Tanila said as she moved to where both warriors stood fooling around, as usual. “Let’s get that chest and see if anything is worthwhile.”

The chest had a ring up for grabs, and everyone else passed so Fowl could have it. A bright orange cloak awaited him and soon decorated Fowl’s back. Someone had mentioned the word *pumpkin,* which had brought some choice curse words from the dwarf. A pair of red chain gloves went to Max, and both casters found a pair of lizardskin boots.

“I’m not sure how I feel about these,” Tanila said as she held the boots up. “It doesn’t really match my style.”

“Who cares?” Batrire replied as she proudly held hers. “Both of us need a new pair of boots, and they have to be better than what we are wearing now.”

“Fashion, Batrire, fashion. Soon, something with a massive brown spike will be your reward, and don’t make me–”

“Hey now, let’s not make fun of me,” Max said, cutting off Tanila, who was starting to laugh already.

“Fair point,” Batrire said with a sigh. “If a brown spike item shows up, I will probably just burn it.”

Laughing, the four of them headed to the portal, ready to head to the next dungeon.

“Ogre humping gods… you got to be kidding me…”

Fowl’s curse words finally subsided as the four of them stood there, looking at the portal to the elemental boss.

“Tell me we aren’t seriously considering this…”

Max watched the others as they all stood there looking at Fowl, who shook his head, knowing full well they were going to go in.

“A blue and purple boss portal… I mean…” Tanila paused, looking at Batrire, who just nodded in agreement. “We just turned everything in yesterday. If we show up with something today…”

“We still have to beat this thing,” Fowl added. “It took us four hours to make it through those golems. I can’t do jack to them, and they still hurt when they hit. We are about to fight a boss, not just any boss, but one whose room has a portal like that. What if we get in there and we can’t leave?”

“Then we fight and win,” Batrire answered, giving her plate-wearing dwarf a shove.

“I guess after this, we hit the scorpion dungeon?” Fowl asked.

Max saw the expression on Batrire’s face, and Tanila hissed at Fowl, who only realized how bad that comment was after he made it.

“If you want, we can,” Batrire said quietly. “If you’re brave enough to go into the boss room, then I guess I can’t say no to fighting the scorpion dungeon either.”

“It’s not the sam–”

“It is the same,” Batrire argued, stopping Tanila’s defense. “Fowl’s right. I made fun of him for being afraid, but I’m acting the same way about the scorpions. If he wants me to face my fears, he will need to face his.”

Max could only imagine how thankful Fowl must be for having his plate helmet still on, able to hide whatever expression the dwarf must have.

“Gods, if I die, at least tell my parents I went out with a bang.”

“So that’s a yes?” Tanila asked.

The warrior nodded as he strode toward the portal. “Warriors first.”

Batrire held out her hand and started to open her mouth, but it was too late. Fowl had already entered the portal.

“That bastard… I swear I’m going to kill him when we get out of here.”

Grunting, Max moved toward the portal, not wanting to leave his friend in there alone.

“Goblin shite…”

Those words filled Max’s ears before he saw what Fowl was cursing about. As his vision returned, the boss filled it.

“Holy dragon balls… that thing is–”

“Massive… and there isn’t a portal behind us.”

Max spun, seeing both women appear behind him but noticing that there was indeed no portal to escape.

Turning his eyes to the women, he saw both of them react, their faces going white as they saw the boss, and then turned, realizing there was no way out.

“I’m sorry,” Batrire said quietly, facing Fowl, still staring at the boss. “This is my fault.”

“It isn’t,” Fowl said as he turned to face her and pulled his helm off. A few wet lines were on his face, at some point having come from his eyes. “We would have gone in here eventually. The problem with being stupid is we would have convinced ourselves.”

Turning back to the room, Max took in the massive rock boss. It was easily over fifteen feet tall and had a body that was so thick he wasn’t sure how many hits it would take to crack it open. It was at least twice as wide as the other golems they had fought. If the shard was inside it like all the others, he tried to figure out how he could hope to get to it. “Well, we need a plan. Any thoughts?”

“I’m just going to let it attack me and not try to die,” Fowl said. His voice never wavered, and Max knew that was exactly what Fowl had intended to do. “I got a few seconds for my buff, and as long as it doesn’t use a crazy overpowered strike like I’m betting it has, I should be able to take one of its hits. After that…”

No one said anything, as Max understood exactly what this fight meant. Every part of this fight would come down to him. There would be no one but him who could damage this as magic basically bounced off the stone.

Are you there? If you can hear me, we both know I’m in a spot and may need your help.

Laughter echoed in his head, and Max felt the voice inside him respond. It was different than usual.

This is your doing, not mine. You didn't have to follow that fool in.

He's my friend. I won't let him die if I can prevent it.

So now you will die with them all?

If I die, you die as well.

Max put his hands to his temple. The throbbing as the laughter in his head grew louder was becoming too much.

Yes, but they will die as well. I am willing to bargain to help, but you must be willing to pay the price…

"Seth, are you ok?"

Max knew his face was scrunched, and he looked at Tanila and the others who were watching him.

"I'm talking with… it… It wants to make a deal for help."

"What kind of deal?" Tanila asked.

Max could see the way her cheeks wrinkled as her face grew tight. She was grimacing.

"I don't know yet, but something tells me I'm not sure I'll want to pay the price."

121 - Life or Death

[121 - Life or Death - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Max stood there, waiting for the deal this *thing* inside him would offer. The sound of his teeth grinding against each other told him to stop clenching his jaw so tight.

What… what is the cost?

There will come a time when I will require a life. You will take that life when I say it is time.

And if I refuse?

Max felt his stomach tighten. It wasn't him doing this action but whatever was inside him.

If you strike the deal and fail to live up to your part, I will no longer allow you access to me for some time. Imagine not healing, getting stronger, or finding skills to gain. What will your party do when you stumble and fall and cannot protect them?

Eventually, you will come begging to me, asking me to let you be free until the day you lose yourself.

I would rather die than allow you that.

Max could feel the conflict inside him. It knew he was telling the truth, and they were at an impasse.

There is no way I will allow you to pick someone at random and decide they should die. I will not kill a friend or someone innocent or–

No one is innocent! Everyone has killed something! If you want to handle this fight alone, do so. Just know that their deaths will be because you were too weak.

“Seth?”

Looking up, Max hadn’t realized he was staring at the ground. He saw Tanila and the other two watching him.

“What does it want, Seth?”

Moving his jaw to release some of the tension that had formed, Max groaned as he moved his head around, feeling all the tightness in his neck.

“It wants me to kill someone when it chooses someone. It will tell me at its choosing, and I–”

“You can’t!” exclaimed Batrire, moving closer to Max as she cut him off. “How can you let it make that choice?!”

“I may not have a choice,” Max replied. His frown was evidence of his displeasure with the problem. “If I don’t and one of you dies, how will I ever live with myself? Especially if I knew I could have prevented it.”

“Do not trade your soul or conscience for that!” Batrire exclaimed again. “None of us want you to ever trade that for us! Right?”

She turned and looked at the other two behind her, and Tanlia and Fowl nodded in agreement.

“All three of us would rather die than allow you to be enslaved to whatever would make a deal like that.”

“What if it was a murderer or someone bad? What it–”

“No.” Fowl’s voice was firm and as clear as a bell. “Batrire is right. We chose this place. We will fight this. If we live or die, it will be a test of our skill as a team.”

Fowl approached Max, grabbed his friend’s arm, and squeezed. “Family doesn’t trade lives. We fight for them. Today, we will live or die together, but we do it the right way no matter what happens. Do you understand?”

As Max nodded, he could hear laughter inside him.

I shall enjoy watching this. Perhaps you will all live. Maybe you won't. If the moment comes and you find yourself with no other option, just ask, and I will consider our deal made.

I would rather die.

We shall see.

Max grunted and shook his head, trying to clear his mind so he could focus.

"Ok. Let's figure out what we can do and how to win," Max said, giving a quick nod. "What are our options?"

Max didn't like the choices, but their options were limited.

"Remember, it should be slow, but there is no guarantee it will be. Keep your distance and try to skirt the outside of the room. Use the two hundred yards of space we have to our advantage."

Fowl grunted and began to rotate his shoulders. "Max is right. Also, you two look over there. Use those rocks to hopefully slow it down if it does come after you."

Tanila and Batrire nodded, scanning the massive floor once more.

Dry, slightly cracked brown dirt filled the massive circular room. The walls were a rock of similar color that rose over one hundred feet before ending in a mid-afternoon sky, complete with a sun that seemed to radiate heat. A few rock piles that were ten feet tall stood around the floor, each at least ten feet wide.

"I'll focus on control. You just do what you can to stay…" Tanila stopped herself, realizing what she was about to say.

"Don't worry, I've got this," Fowl answered, tapping his plate helmet gently with his hammer. "You all ready?"

Everyone grunted, and Max could hear Fowl's deep breath before he charged across the yellow line.

The massive boss moved toward them, slow steps eating up the distance with each stride.

Max realized how far one hundred yards was as he and Fowl raced toward the boss, knowing there was no way things would be easy.

"I got it's front. You let me get its attention!" Fowl shouted as he ran.

"Throw a rock at it. I'm sure it won't like that!" Max yelled back as he moved off to the side.

Smiling to himself, Max saw Fowl put his hammer away and pull a rock out from his storage, preparing to throw it at the boss.

No way to miss that thing… it's massive…

Fowl planted his feet and threw, his rock bouncing harmlessly off the boss, but for a moment, Max thought he saw the golem move faster.

Pulling his hammer back out, Fowl moved to position the boss, making it turn so its side would face Tanila and Batrire while Max was behind.

One shot... one shot...

The boss reached Fowl, dwarfing the tiny warrior as its rock foot slammed down near him, barely missing as Fowl rolled to the side, avoiding the stomp.

The ground erupted, sending up rocks and dust.

One shot... the math works... it has to.

Max gave the signal by lifting his halberd over his head and shaking it.

A stone wall appeared before him, ten feet long and slightly angled, leading up to the boss's back.

Max ran, driving himself up the ramp and leaping toward the boss.

[Power Strike]

[Evasion]

[Regeneration]

[Berserker]

Mid-air, as Max hurtled toward the boss, his vision shifted, and all he could see was the massive back side of his target. His attack had already started, the hammer side coming toward the boss’s back as his vision and ability to think vanished.

The small part of his weapon struck, a massive sound of rock shattering filling the room as a four-foot wide crack splintered across the back of the golem, creating a fissure over a foot deep in its natural armor.

It tumbled forward, almost falling on Fowl, who darted out of the way of the massive golem.

Max landed on the boss's back, swinging repeatedly, raining down blow after blow upon it.

Chunks of rocks scattered in every direction, and a massive arm swung at him, dodged not because he cared about it but because his evasion skill made him move.

He jumped backward, landed on the ground, and lashed at the golem's leg. His first strike cracked its left leg, and the second one caused a good two-foot chunk to fall to the ground.

Another strike came at him, a leg this time, the golem somehow spinning, and Max leaped backward again, putting distance between him and the boss.

Max didn’t notice the green flicker around him as he charged the boss, the evasion skill wearing off as he ran, hammering at the boss’s leg again.

It had fixed itself and was upright, its body able to maneuver as rocks shifted against each other, allowing it to stand as he approached.

All Max could see was a rock that needed to be crushed.

His halberd connected with its massive arm as the creature swung, and a thunderous sound came as the two collided.

Max flew backward, a trail of rocks coming with him while his halberd was flung across the room.

A section of the golem's arm up to what one would consider an elbow was gone, smashed into fragments of random sizes.

Tumbling over and over, Max didn’t register the pain in his body. Both arms were broken as he stumbled, trying to stand, a red view of the world still clouding his vision.

Batrire healed, and his regeneration kicked in as bones snapped back into place, cuts, and wounds sealed from the two forms of healing.

The golem moved toward Max, running with a noticeable limp. Its speed was reduced now, and Max began to charge the boss, with thirty yards between them.

With ten yards left, Max’s vision returned to normal, and he stumbled, seeing the boss coming at him, its arm raised high and ready to smash him.

With no time to spare, Max pulled his shield from his storage and prepared for the hit.

[Armored Warrior]

The boss’s left fist slammed into him, a crack coming as Max felt his shield fracture under the weight of the blow. His legs buckled, the strength of the boss now vastly above his own, and he was driven into the ground.

For that brief moment, Max understood Fowl's pain when he suffered blows like this. It didn’t hurt; he knew his hit points had doubled, and his body felt hard. He could easily take another hit but didn’t want to waste the opportunity.

As the golem’s left leg came to kick him, Max rolled to the side, not wanting to be punted away, and looked around the room.

“To your right!” Fowl shouted.

His dwarven friend was smacking the boss’s right leg with his hammer, small chips of stone coming free but doing no damage.

Looking toward the right, Max moved again, easily dodging the slow blows of the boss now that he could see them and react. About forty yards away was his halberd.

Max took off sprinting toward it and was halfway there when the ground began to shake.

He staggered sideways, the floor rising like waves on the water, growing bigger as they traveled past him. He could feel them coming and tried to maneuver up and down with them as best as possible, but it was more complicated than he thought it would be. Every time his foot touched the ground, the motion vibrated through him.

Glancing back, Max saw the boss had turned a black color headed toward him, and every step it took sent out shockwaves that acted like a pebble in a pond, rippling out in a circle.

Fowl was on the ground, bouncing up and down from the rapid rings of dirt and stone that rose up one or two feet beneath him.

The ground rose almost five feet high where Max was, requiring him to be on top of a wave to see his friend faltering.

The distance between him and the boss was rapidly shrinking, and Max knew if he didn't do something, it would catch him, and his defensive ability was over.

[Haste]

Cursing under his breath, Max activated his last ability, feeling power and speed flowing through his legs.

Like an arrow fired from a bow, he took off, navigating the rolling dirt floor, and scooped up his halberd from the shifting ground.

Looking backward once more, he saw the golem still coming.

Sighing, Max knew he needed to stay away and was unsure how long the boss's ability might take to wear off.

Running was his best option; he needed to get closer to his allies without bringing the boss and its ability to them.

He ran away from them for now, counting the seconds he had till Haste wore off.

Inside his head, he heard laughter. Gritting his teeth, Max fought back the dread that threatened to overwhelm him.

122 - Sacrifices Made

122 - Sacrifices Made - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

Seven seconds remained on Haste when Max had made it back to his allies, the boss's ability finally stopping and its stone's color returning to the muted brown. He had run past his friends, angling so the boss would run past them.

"Be ready! I need a wall!"

Max didn’t wait for Tanila to respond, trusting her to do what he needed, and ran straight toward the boss.

It thundered at him, but it wasn’t prepared for the speed at which Max was moving.

Max ran through its massive legs as its left arm slammed down toward the ground in an attack that would never connect, seeing a stone wall materialize behind it.

Allowing himself a small smile, Max jumped against the wall, twisting and turning thanks to his improved speed and dexterity. He leaped off the wall and swung his halberd at the same cracked spot on the boss’s back.

The hit connected, more stone pieces falling to the ground, and as both the rock and Max raced toward the dirt floor, a wall of air appeared, catching Max and allowing him to plant his feet and swing again.

A two-foot-long chunk of stone fell free, and the slight shimmer of a magical crystal could be seen.

With no time to waste, a third blow landed. The last layer of stone that protected the crystal fell away, leaving a white gem, over a foot in diameter, vulnerable.

Max leaped back, barely avoiding the right arm coming at him, its shortened length whipping as it twisted quickly.

The air wall he had been on vanished as the boss spun.

Max fell to the ground, rolling and running the second he hit it, hearing the sound of the boss’s foot connecting with the dirt.

“I can see it!” Max shouted. “Tanila, you’re up!”

Unsure it would work, Max lured the boss so its back was to their mage.

He wanted to watch but could barely catch glimpses of the spells forming in the air above the elven woman who always impressed him.

Between the boss’s legs, he could see Tanila’s magic begin to form. Ice, stone, and fire appeared, each as a long spear.

A smile appeared as he saw them racing across the room floor, all three coming for the boss.

An explosion filled his ears, and he felt the power that was released as her spells connected against the crystal in the boss’s torso.

The boss froze mid-stride, and Max stopped when he was about fifteen yards from it.

It began to shake, and cracks started appearing in its outer edges when an itch inside him told him things would get worse.

“RUN!” Talina shouted.

He didn’t need to hear that a second time, turning and racing for cover as fast as he could, spotting one of the rock pillars nearby and leaping behind it.

An explosion erupted from where the boss stood, rocks flying across the room with such force that the impact from the ones that hit the pillar Max was hiding behind made him concerned for his friends.

The tiny window with their party bars showed no one was hurt and after, a moment, Max glanced around the rock formation and saw Fowl sprinting toward the smoldering broken crystal on the floor.

“Goblin shite,” Max cursed as he ran, storing his halberd on the first stride and pumping his arms and legs as fast as he could.

At that moment, Max wished he still had his haste spell, knowing time wasn’t on their side, but he actually hoped one of them would make it.

Less than twenty yards remained for both of them when the crystal began to fade, and they both slowed down, knowing it was too late.

‘FACKING OGRE SHITE!” Fowl cursed, waving both hands in the air as he slowed down.

Snorting, Max trotted to where his dwarven friend was, smiling slightly as he drew near.

“I sure wish you had longer legs,” Max teased, watching his friend pull his plate helmet off and store it.

“You should have saved that haste skill till now. That crystal…”

Both nodded and looked around the room, spotting the chest that had just appeared.

“Holy elf tits,” Max said, not even concerned that Tanila was around.

“Mother of holy elf tits,” Fowl added right after. “That chest is huge… like I’ve never seen a chest that big before…”

Both men stopped and looked at each other and started laughing.

The women arrived a little after, and both had cocked eyebrows wondering why the men were laughing so hard.

“Should I ask?” Batrire questioned as she looked them both up and down.

“No… I don’t think Fowl would like to explain his last comment,” Max replied, getting an elbow to his side from his dwarven friend.

“Look at the size of that chest,” Tanila said, awe in her voice over what she was looking at.

Fowl and Max started laughing again, and it took Batrire only a moment to realize why.

“Gah, you boys,” muttered Batrire, “and your fascination… Not everybody likes big chests. Right, Seth?”

Max coughed, his sonar sensing Tanila turning. “I think there are lots of perfect-sized chests. Perhaps this one has really good loot.”

Batrire bobbed her head as she said, “Uh huh…” Her expression told both men she didn’t believe Max’s words.

“This thing is wider than Fowl,” Max stated, looking at the chest, which was four feet tall and six feet long. “And it looks like some kind of stone, but I know it’s not.”

Tanila tapped it, nodding in agreement. A giant golem was drawn on the chest, holding up a crystal, and flanking on either side of the giant golem were smaller ones, all holding up their arms.

A hum could be heard from the chest, and Fowl was practically salivating as he waited for the other three to stop inspecting it.

“I’m going to ask because I figure you three know. Why would a chest be this big?”

Tanila snorted, and Batrire smiled.

“Well, I’m sure we will all find out one day. This size chest is usually reserved for a tower floor,” Tanila answered. “So… yeah. This should be a fairly unbelievable chest.”

“Better than the ogre one?”

“It better be,” Fowl replied. “Especially since Tanila killed the boss.”

Their elven mage’s cheeks turned bright red, and she winced at Fowl’s words. “About that… I’m sorry. I can only imagine what you would have gotten had you killed it.”

Shaking his head, Max shrugged. “I won’t entertain that thought. Personally, I think it was better you killed it than me.”

“Why?” Tanila asked, her eyebrows drawn together, showing her confusion.

“First, I don’t always need to be the one doing the killing. It’s good when I can, but we are going to get to a point where someone has to take the kill versus risking us getting injured waiting for me to. Second, I can only imagine the possible skill I might have gained. Not getting it, I think, is going to upset whatever is inside me. Sure, I’m curious, and a part of me *really* wanted it, but the part of who I am that matters is glad I didn’t.”

A smile appeared on Tanila’s lips.

“That said, I think everyone would agree our arse-kicking mage should open this chest!”

Fowl cheered, not concerned with who opened it but only that someone was going to.

Batrire motioned toward the chest, and Tanila moved to its front, putting both hands on the massive stone lip.

The lid popped open with a shove, and all four moved to peer inside.

“Need to stand on your tiptoes?” Max asked as he saw Fowl peering over the edge.

“Suck it,” the dwarf replied, about to say more when everyone went silent.

“It’s a raid chest,” Tanila whispered.

Inside were the individual items that always appeared for each of them. Next to those four were crystal clear rings with Earth Golem Prince etched on them. Past those rings were four more items, each changing as they waited to be rolled on and won.

“Four extra items,” Fowl whispered. “Four… I mean… there’s one for each of us.”

Looking at his dwarven friend, Max leaned over and held up a hand, getting a high-five from his buddy.

“Well, I want to check this out first,” Max said, leaning over and taking out a belt he knew was his.

It formed in his hand, made of a material that seemed like stone but felt cold, like metal. Clear crystal lines ran along the two-inch wide brown belt.

[*Inspect Belt*]

*****

Belt of the Golem

+ 4 Strength and Constitution

20% Resistance to Slash and Piercing attacks

Bonded

*****

“Uh… guys… you can see its stats,” Max said as he quickly removed his raptor belt and put it in storage.

Each of the other three leaned in, taking their items, and smiles started to appear as they inspected them.

“Holy dwarf balls,” Tanila said as she held the stone band. “Are each of yours a bonus of eight stat points?”

Fowl nodded, holding at a belt that matched Max’s. “Four to strength and constitution and resistance to slashing and piercing.”

Max smiled and then started to chuckle. “Yes! Belt brothers!”

Batrire groaned as she held a band that looked just like Tanila’s. “Wisdom and Constitution?”

Tanila nodded and then grinned. “Resistance to spells?”

Laughing, Batrire nodded and smiled.

“I guess that seems fair,” Fowl said with a shrug. “Now… what about the other four?”

Having finished putting on his belt, Max turned his attention to the chest and the four items that were changing colors.

Two rings and two sets of earrings made up the four items. Each of them shifted slightly within the chest, the color of the stone a different hue or with a little bit of more clear crystal.

“Can men wear earrings?” Max asked, winking at Tanila.

“They can… but typically, the earrings are more for casters as the stats focus on that,” she replied. “I am sure a non-caster has taken a pair of earrings at some point, but usually only after the casters have theirs.”

Playing with his ear lobe, Max glanced at Fowl and gave a wink. “Want a pair of earrings?”

Frowning and groaning a little, his fellow warrior didn’t seem excited about that notion. “I’ll pass if I can. Let’s just say my father and mother were never the kind to like a male dwarf with earrings. Some are ok with that, but I’d prefer not to have one more thing for them to be upset about when I finally go home.”

“I guess that means the earrings are for you two. Can you wear more than one pair?”

Batrire nodded as she pointed to one of the sets in the chest. “You can wear up to three, but depending upon the power, they may interfere with each other. Most never do more than two on each ear.”

Tanila nodded and watched as Batrire touched the first pair.

After thirty seconds, when no one else touched them, she withdrew a pair of earrings with a slight brown tint and a weird symbol made of crystal.

“That’s a dwarven rune,” Tanila muttered while Batrire’s hands shook as she held them up.

“By Ockrim’s beard, it is!” shouted Fowl.

Their dwarven healer’s eyes went wide as she held them, obviously having identified them.

“So?” Fowl asked, leaning close so he could watch his partner’s face.

Batrire’s voice was soft and low. Max wondered if the rest of them heard her when she finally spoke.

“Fi… five to intelligence and wisdom and… fifteen percent bonus to my heals…”

“Holy…” Fowl stopped, seeing Tanila’s glare.

“I know,” Batrire said. “This is raid quality… people would kill for this. Tanila, you get yours.”

Tanila smiled then quickly touched the other remaining set of earrings, and when she could take them out, her face went white as her jaw fell. They had a slightly different hue to the stone's color; this time, an elven crystalline rune was on them.

“And?”

Tanila shook her head, closed her mouth, and took a moment to collect herself. “Five to the same stats and fifteen percent to spell potency.”

“Potency? Like damage, duration, and strength?” Max asked.

“Exactly.”

Fowl was groaning as he tapped the edge of the chest with his fingers.

“You want to go first or me?”

Max smiled. “You go. It looks like you might pass out if we wait any longer.”

Fowl let out a whoop and touched the first ring, waiting for it to finally allow him to take it out.

Holding it near his face, the dwarf studied the dwarven rune on his dark brown ring.

“Ockrim’s beard…”

“What is it?” Batrire asked, anxious to hear what Fowl’s ring gave.

“It’s…

123 - Two Choices

123 - Two Choices - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“It’s a skill ring,” Fowl whispered quietly.

“What?!” shouted Tanila, moving so she could stand next to Fowl and look at the ring cupped in his hand.

“It has the skill Taunt, rank uncommon on it,” he replied.

Max saw their reactions and remembered hearing that gear in the tower was way better than anything he could imagine, but his mind was racing, trying to understand how any of this was possible.

“Wait, everyone, stop for a second. Can someone tell me why we are getting these kinds of items now?” Max asked, snapping his fingers to get their attention as he spoke.

The three turned and looked at him, shock still etched on each face.

“It has to be…,” replied Batrire before turning to look at the ring Fowl held with as much tenderness as he might a baby. She pointed upward at the ceiling of the dungeon. “Someone up there.”

“But we aren’t in the tower! How can a chest like one from there show up?”

Fowl shrugged as he started to grin and then quickly slid the ring on his finger.

“Who the hell cares! I got a skill ring! I could sell this for, like, five hundred gold or more!”

Fowl’s explosive statement earned him a kick in the leg from Batrire, which bounced off his plate armor, and a harsh look from Tanila.

“You better not even think about doing that,” growled Batrire as she got in his face. “You and I both know that thos–”

“Woah, my sweet ball of fury,” Fowl said quickly, lifting his hand to Batrire’s cheek and cutting her words off so fast that Max thought she might bite her tongue. A rush of crimson colored her cheeks, and she glanced at Fowl, then at Tanila and Max, who were both smirking. “I won’t sell it. I’m just saying it’s that valuable.”

“I’d snip something if you did,’ Batrire replied, jerking her head back and stepping away to regain her composure.

Fowl didn’t react, instead turning to Max and motioning to the chest. “Get yours. We need to find out what it is!”

Without wasting a moment, Max moved to the chest and touched the last ring, feeling like those thirty seconds were an eternity till it appeared in his hand.

Pulling it out of the chest, Max looked at it momentarily before holding it out toward the others.

The ring was a dark brown like the boss’s body had been, and two crystal runes appeared to be stacked on top of each other.

“What is that writing?” Fowl asked as he cocked his head back and forth.

Batrire and Tanila looked at it, then shook their heads as they frowned.

“I’ve never seen runes written like that before,” Tanila replied slowly, “and you two know I have seen a lot of different runes.”
Max didn’t care. Turning the ring back toward him, he did what he had been waiting to do.

[*Inspect Ring*]

*****

Ring of the Golem Prince

+4 Constitution

25% Resistance to Spells

Bonded

*****

Max groaned slightly and then saw the others waiting for him to share.

“So it adds four to my constitution, and I get a twenty-five percent resistance to spells.”

“Why in the gods did you groan?” asked Fowl. “That is an amazing ring!”

Grimacing, he slowly shrugged. “I wanted a skill ring like yours.”

“Mother elf humpin', orc lovin', piece of…” Fowl cursed, turning around as he walked away, continuing his tirade.

Batrire chuckled, and even Tanila couldn’t help but laugh a moment.

“Why is he so upset?” Max asked, looking at the two of them.

“Why do you need a ring that has a skill? You have more skills than the three of us combined.”
Tanila’s response seemed so simple, yet Max realized he hadn’t been very sensitive to Fowl.

Grimacing, he went to where his dwarven friend was still cursing under his breath and coughed. “Sorry, bud. I just wanted to be like you.”

Fowl turned around and groaned, rolling his eyes as he stared at Max. “You’re funny, you know that? Are you holding back and not telling us you have an entertainer skill? Because there is no way you want to be like me,” Fowl replied, motioning to himself.

“You got a nice beard and some great hair,” Max replied. “Look at me, bald all over.”

“Bald all over, you say,” Fowl replied, winking and smiling as he did. “You hear that, Tanila? This boy is bald all over! What do you think about that?”

Wincing, Max resisted the temptation to turn around and see how she had responded to that question, but the look on Fowl’s face told him she had reacted precisely how the dwarf intended.

“How about we stop all this nonsense, collect these tokens, and get out of here?”

Max nodded, moving toward the chest and trying to keep from meeting Tanila’s eyes, whose face was redder than Batrire had been earlier.

Each of them pulled out a crystal ring, and Max put his in storage. “Are we going to be able to turn this one in?”

Biting her lip, Tanila winced. “Maybe we should check with someone at the Golden Axe and get their opinion. I’m sure Everett would know.”

Nodding, Max heard a whistle and turned to see what Fowl was motioning to.

Two portals had appeared after they looted the chest.

“Someone tell me this shouldn’t happen,” Max said.

“Not normal at all for most of the world… apparently a common thing with you,” Fowl replied.

“We need to go,” Tanila said, pointing at the portal on the right. It was blue, and they knew it would return them to the adventurers guild. Next to it was a deep red portal, pulsing with power and giving off a slight hum.

“That can’t be…” Batrire muttered.

“It is, and we need to go now. There is a dungeon break somewhere.”

Max turned and looked at Tanila. Her face was worried, and the wrinkles of concern that rarely ever showed up were all over her forehead.

“Why is it red? I mean, there has been no mention of a red portal in any of the books I read before.”

Tanila pointed at the blue portal. “We can talk later tonight in the inn. For now, we need to go back to the adventurers hall. There is no telling what is happening outside the city right now.”

Grumbling, Max nodded and moved to the blue portal. A part of him wanted to go inside the red one. It called to him, promising power and more.

As if sensing his hesitation and that he might change his mind, Fowl came up behind Max and pushed him through the blue portal.

“I’ve dodged enough already today… I’d rather not push it,” Fowl said before moving into the blue portal.

Batrire snorted and followed, leaving Tanila alone as she stared at the pulsing red one.

“Thuyja, if you’re listening, please stop these portals… I… I don’t want us to die.”

Done whispering the small prayer, she hurried through the blue portal and into the chaos outside.

“What is it?” Tanila asked as she heard the bells chiming.

“Dungeon break, just as you called it,” Fowl answered, motioning for them to hurry back to the main room of the adventurers hall.

Every adventurer present lined the room's outer edges inside the massive open area.

Five people in robes stood in the middle of the room, and everyone stood quietly whispering to each other as they waited to learn what was happening.

Multiple times, attendants ran up to an older woman in a blue robe trimmed with silver lines, each handing her a paper before running back to the counter.

The five whispered quietly amongst themselves until the bells stopped.

“ADVENTURERS!” a male dwarf in blue robes shouted, silencing the room instantly.

“I must inform each of you that multiple dungeon breaks have occurred outside the wall,” the older woman said, her voice carrying across the room and sounding as if she were standing right next to each person.

Murmurs and whispers broke out momentarily before a loud whistle from the dwarf silenced everyone.

“I must ask all who are willing and able to help to go quickly to the east! There are four breaks, and we will be responsible for the one on this side of the city!”

Her voice almost sounded like it cracked momentarily as she said *four breaks*.

This time, a large amount of conversation broke out and Max turned to see Tanila and the others grimacing. He had questions but knew now wasn't the time.

"The dungeon we will be tasked to hold off and clear is an elite ogre one. They are obviously harder than the normal level thirty ogres and come in large packs of up to ten! Please consider joining another group and helping defend the city and its citizens! We have put out a call to all the Factions and expect some help in the coming hours. If all goes as planned, the boss will be defeated, and we can rest for another month or so. All those who are willing, please make your way toward the transportation room below!"

Max glanced at Tanila and mouthed the words *transportation room* as he gave her a puzzled look.

Nodding, Tanila held up her hand and motioned for him to wait.

"As always, we will not force anyone to help or expect trophies to be brought back. Just know that if you help, we will give bonus points, as always! Be safe, and thank you for your commitment to protecting the weak!"

After the woman spoke, the room erupted into loud shouts and questions as people began to decide what to do.

"Tell me what you three think," Batrire said as she looked around, ensuring no one was paying attention to them.

"I'm game," Fowl replied. "Even if we don't have our skills available, we should be able to handle some ogres pretty easily."

Max shrugged and looked at Tanila, who sighed as she nodded.

"It's what we agreed to do as adventurers," she replied. "Does anyone need anything before we go? Potions?"

Fowl glanced at Max, who held up two fingers. Nodding, the dwarf ran off toward the counter where the guild was quickly supplying them to those who answered the call for help.

"Listen," Tanila said as she grabbed Max's shoulder and pulled him close. "Fight smart, don't be going crazy or doing stuff like last time. The people who will be near us won't miss it like the others did when we fought during the last break. Stick with one thing and do it well. Understand?"

Nodding, he gave her his best smile. "I promise to behave."

"That isn't what I asked for, but I'll take it knowing you and Fowl will break that promise soon enough."

Once Fowl returned with the potions, the four of them moved to follow the stream of adventurers, heading into a pair of doors Max had never really paid attention to before.

"How does a transportation room work?" he whispered.

"You've heard the stories of teleportation?" Tanila asked, making sure no one was paying attention.

“Those are true?”

She nodded and pointed at the massive room at the end of the hall they were in.

“In the capitals, they built these rooms, and the cost is hard to put a number to. They aren’t used often, mainly only for these breaks. The power this will take will require at least a month to replace.”

Max shook his head, pondering how much there was still for him to learn and how Tanila always seemed to have an answer. As they walked toward the massive room, Max realized there was a lot about Tanila he still didn’t know.

She saw him looking at her and pursed her lips. “That look on your face, what is wrong?”

Shaking his head, Max took a deep breath and smiled. “I’ll tell you later. I want to ask you something when we aren’t about to fight a horde of ogres.”

Raising an eyebrow, Tanila watched as Max turned his attention to the room they were about to enter.

Past the last set of doors was a massive room, easily fifty yards long and wide.

Thick, six-inch, clear crystal lines ran in geometrical patterns to a massive crystal shard in the middle of the room, sitting on a crystal pedestal.

Seeing it brought back memories of Max’s hometown and how this adventure started. Max almost stumbled but caught himself as he looked down at the crystal lines.

He absently followed Fowl and Batrire as they moved with the other adventurers to stand within a crystal square etched in the floor.

Adventures were squished together as they surrounded the shard and waited expectantly.

Unlike the rest, Max couldn’t help but study the lines on the floor. Once the rest of his party stopped, he bent down and touched one with his hand.

“Holy elf tits,” Max cursed quietly, getting a nudge from Fowl, who was looking at him with a frown.

Standing, Max shook his head and motioned for Fowl to wait.

He wanted them to be alone when he told them what he was about to say.

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

This spot is my special spot (and not like that you dirty minded people I love).

Not a lot of books require me to pull over to the side of the road and stop. Book 1 on Audio did just that.

Jolly Jupiter wrote - Beers and Beards and his second book is out now on Amazon.

If you're up for some good times and dwarven humor, check it out. I liked the book enough that not only did I read it, listen to the audio, but I also bought the paperback!

124 - Defending a City

[124 - Defending a City - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Once everyone had filed in and the doors were shut, a few attendants helped get everyone who was going inside the room’s middle center crystal square.

“Sometimes they don’t need to send as many, and sometimes the entire room is full,” Tanila whispered. “Each transport requires a different amount of power.”

Max nodded, taking in everything he could, but being as short as he was made seeing anything difficult.

Three bells rang out, and Max felt Tanila grab his hand. Looking at her, she smiled and gave it a squeeze.

“Clench your stomach once it starts… trust me, it's better that way,” she told him. “And before you ask, you’ll know when it starts.”

Sure enough, a bell rang again, and a bright light began to pulse from the shard. The lines on the floor surged with the same light, and Max turned to see Tanila nod her head. Then, her whole face went rigid as she closed her eyes.

Max did the same, trying not to squeeze her hand hard enough to break it while flexing every muscle he could think of while waiting for whatever would happen.

A hum came first, and a warm wash of power went through him a few seconds later. It felt like he was soaking in a warm tub of water, and then, suddenly, it was over.

He felt a squeeze on his hand and realized it was Tanila. Opening his eyes, Max found himself a half mile outside the city, slightly north of the eastern road, in an area that had been roped off.

“EVERYONE OUT! SPREAD OUT! THEY ARE ONLY A MILE FROM THE OUTER EDGES OF THE FARMLANDS!”

Adventures began to jog toward the road, and the four fell in with the crowd, not running, yet still moving briskly.

People outside the wall were hurrying toward the city, staying to the side of the road, and a few even cheering as the progression of adventurers ran toward danger.

“What do we plan to do?” Max asked as they jogged.

“Not die,” joked Fowl, who ignored the look Batrire gave him. “Seriously though, we need to find another group and work together. Once we reach the fields, people will spread out. Follow my lead.”

Nodding, Max didn’t say anything else, not sure what the day would bring.

Quickly glancing up, he was grateful that the sun was still high in the sky. They had at least four hours till sunset, and if the woman in the guild hall was correct, someone should defeat the boss soon, ending this break.

“We’ll join you four!”

Fowl nodded and motioned to the group standing slightly apart, as were all the groups, trying to form quickly and get moving.

“Good!” Fowl shouted as the three elves and two humans ran toward them. “Two warriors, I’m the tank. He’s the DPS but can off-tank, and this is our healer and mage. You?”

The female elf who had shouted they would join quickly pointed at the other four in her group.

“The one in plate armor, Nuala, is a warrior like you. The green-haired elf with the bow is Osonia. I’m Huethae, and as you can see, I am also an archer. Owen, in the plain gray robes, is our healer, and Asher is an off-tank warrior like yours.”

Everyone shook hands and exchanged names before Fowl and Huethae started to plan.

“Four warrior formation, alternating damage dealers, and a healer in the back?” Fowl asked.

“Sounds good to us,” Huethae replied, motioning to the others. “Call out for heals?”

“That works. Let’s go.”

Fowl led the way as Max chatted with Asher, both sharing their woes of having to off-tank for a plate-wearing warrior.

“FOCUS on the ogre on the right!”

Max moved to the ogre on the right as it lumbered toward him.

Each of the ogres was eleven feet tall, almost double his size, and every one wore at least chain armor except the casters.

The party had managed the initial rush of ogres since, during the first wave, the most ogres that had come at once were packs of four. The longer they fought, the denser the packs became, and now they faced a group of seven.

Nuala and Fowl were doing a fantastic job of tanking and handling aggro. Max tried to ignore the itch in the back of his mind that everything seemed to be working out too easily, even in the face of these enemies.

He was taking two or three hits to kill the ogres, not because he couldn’t do it in one or two, but because Tanila had warned him to keep things discrete and see how the others were managing.

Fowl’s new ring was helping a ton as they fought. It only had a thirty-minute cooldown and had already proven its worth when a pair of ogres ignored everyone else to charge the archers in the back who were raining down death.

The two elves were fantastic to watch when he could. Their accuracy was insane, and he had already winced more than once as their arrows pierced an ogre in the eye.

Reminder when fighting an archer… protect the eyes…

Fowl already had two ogres on him, and coming from the right was a slightly larger-than-usual ogre with a shield and a massive six-foot sword.

Most of the shots the archers fired off were blocked, and any that got past the shield, the armor it wore stopped them from penetrating.

Charging, Max closed the distance with the ogre, ignoring the shaman on the left side.

Swinging his halberd, he watched as the ogre deftly blocked it, its sword coming at him the moment it stopped his strike with its shield. Jumping back a few feet, the sword strike whipped infront of Max, and he dashed forward, using his speed and dexterity to close the distance again. As he went to counterattack, he saw its leg coming up at him and dodged to the side, not landing his blow but also avoiding the ogre’s kick.

“Come at me, you ugly goblin!” Max shouted, surprised when the ogre roared at him, apparently upset at being called ugly or a goblin.

He tried to pull his shield from storage, feeling it was finally time to use it when he noticed the empty slot in his dimensional space.

Goblin nuts! I forgo–

A combo attack came at him, and Max backed up using his halberd to parry the attacks from a sword that moved faster than expected.

No kill had yet gained him stats or skills, but now, Max felt there might be a chance at one for the first time since the break started.

The two of them danced, blades colliding with each other. Max always had to dodge and dance around, keeping away from the kicks and shield bashes thrown his way.

Time was lost as he found himself in a rhythm, reading the ogre’s movements, seeing how it attacked and parried.

This thing must have a rare weapon skill…

As they clashed again, he could see the rage on the ogre’s face, those massive tusks chomping at nothing as it occasionally roared at him.

Parrying a three-swing combo from the ogre, Max was about to go on the offensive when he saw ice forming up the creature's legs.

It roared as the ice raced up its midsection and encased its chest and arms.

“Sorry, I’ve got a team,” Max said, and he didn’t waste a second, moving behind the ogre and then driving his halberd’s pointed tip into its lower back, piercing its armor and shattering the spine.

Knowing the ice would break when he attacked, Max lined up one more big strike and slammed the head of the halberd from maximum range into the upper part of the ogre’s back, hearing a crunch as it shattered the spine higher up.

“I got it!” Max shouted as he saw the others coming to help him, and they slowed down, watching as Max hacked at a leg and cut halfway through. The ice was falling, but so was the ogre as Max delivered one more blow, cutting its right leg off and causing it to fall.

It roared, unable to move its arms and catch itself as it fell face-first into the dirt.

Smiling, Max moved next to where it flailed, trying to roll over, and drove his halberd’s tip into the back of the ogre’s head, piercing through the skull and deep into its brain.

It shuddered, and a cold sensation filled Max.

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Skill Consumed is Higher Rank of Current Skill]

[Upgrading Shield to Rare]

Smiling, Max looked at the others, who nodded and began to get back into position. It was then that he realized they had cleared out the other ogres while he held this one off.

Glancing down at the shield the ogre had used, Max frowned but knew it was better than nothing. He stored his weapon and used both hands to wrench the shield almost as tall as he was from the corpse.

“Are you sure you can use that?” Fowl shouted. “It’s taller than you are!”

Holding the shield wasn’t challenging, as his strength easily allowed it, but Max knew Fowl was right. This thing might serve a purpose at some point, but he couldn’t use it right now with his halberd. Pulling out a sword was also out of the question right now.

He stored it, pulled his weapon back out, and ran to join Fowl and the others.

“I forgot I broke my shield in that last dungeon before the break… so…”

Fowl groaned and leaned his current shield against himself. A moment later, he had a slightly smaller shield in his hand and tossed it to Max.

“Don’t break that one, please!”

Catching it, Max nodded. It felt natural, even more than he could ever remember his old shield feeling. Now he realized why that ogre had been so hard to hit.

“Anything good?” Fowl asked quietly.

“Just enjoying my *rare* shield skill,” Max replied, winking at his friend.

Under Fowl’s plate helmet, Max could hear him cursing softly. “Someday… someday, the gods will love me more for putting up with you.”

Huethea ran up from behind. “We need to move and fast! The group on our left is down! Look!”

Max and Fowl both turned to see where the elf was pointing. Sure enough, there was a group running away from a pack like the one they had just faced. The ogres appeared to be about to kill what looked like a third warrior.

“Let’s go!”

The battle was at least seventy-five yards from them, and Max easily beat the rest of his group to it. He didn’t have many good options. He needed to try and save the warrior in plate that was getting smashed by multiple blows from three ogres.

[Power Strike]

Max came from behind, attacking an ogre that looked exactly like the one he had just faced.

His axe cut through the creature's body, slicing it in half so the ogre fell in two parts.

Without waiting, Max ran forward, his halberd spinning in his hands as he prepared for a second attack. Right as his halberd cut through the leg of a second ogre, a fireball blasted him from the side.

Knowing he had just been hit, Max risked a quick glance and saw a shaman twenty yards away, preparing to cast again.

“Go!”

With two ogres down and one left, Max heard Asher’s call and took off like an arrow toward the shaman. It snarled and unleashed another fireball that washed over him. The pain of the fire hurt, but Max wanted to laugh. Actually, he wanted to scream.

“Whoever you are up there that is making all this happen, you’re a bastard, but I’ll trust you!”

Max’s shout didn’t seem to matter as no one except the ogre shaman heard it.

Surprise filled the shaman as Max had just taken two spells directly to the face and was fine.

The shaman, however, did not do as well when Max swung his halberd from its nuts to the throat, slicing partially through it. His halberd got stuck halfway through the ogre’s chest, requiring him to rip it out before moving from the falling body of the monster.

One quick chop to its neck removed its head, and Max felt a trickle of cold wash over him.

[187 Hit Points Consumed]

Smiling, Max ran toward the others, grateful that only his party could see his health.

125 - An Onslaught of Ogrest

[125 - An Onslaught of Ogres - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Batrire and Owen healed up the warrior whom Max had saved as Huethea used an archer ability that sent an arrow through the last ogre's skull.

The two groups who had fled returned, grateful for the help and grimacing at the three bodies of their fallen teammates.

"I'm sorry for your loss, but you all need to fall back and consider returning to town," Huethea told them as Max and Asher picked up the fallen adventurers, carrying them to where the others were. "We can't escort you, but we need you to go quickly."

Fowl grunted, and Max gave him a perplexed look.

"She's right," Fowl whispered. "They need to go. Look at their eyes. Their spirit is broken. Staying out here will only cause them or others to die."

Bobbing his head, Max could see the blank stares on the faces of the party members they had saved.

"We need to move!" Huethea shouted. "Next wave is incoming!"

Everyone turned and saw a line of ogres stretched as far as the eye could see.

"What in the gods' name is that?" Owen asked, watching the line of ogres advance.

Max looked at his teammates and saw Tanila and Batrire frowning.

"We can't take those, can we?" Asher asked. "There are too many."

Huethea and Fowl looked at each other, both nodding without saying a word.

"We need to run north and find another group," Fowl stated. "We might need to even collect two more after that. This thing is going to descend upon the city, and all we can do is limit how many get there."

"Human balls," Osonia cursed.

Max and Fowl whipped their heads toward the female elf, who saw their gaze. She turned a little red, and both men started laughing.

"I'm going to remember that one," Tanila stated before jogging after the rest of the team, who had already started running.

In the midst of corpses and death, a small thread of laughter came from four people, easing the mood just slightly.

Ten minutes later, six groups gathered together, preparing to face a horde of ogres, now only about two hundred yards away.

“Stay tight! Protect the support classes!” Brunhilde shouted.

Max grunted at Fowl as he listened to the female dwarf leading the warriors. Brunhilde was a level forty-five warrior and was the highest-ranking adventurer.

No one argued. Being in charge carried the burden of responsibility, and with the task before them, it was a burden that none wanted.

“We need to create a wedge and break that line! Once we do, support the main tanks on the edges, and you damage dealers, carve us a path from the back!”

She turned and looked at her counterpart, Diagon, a male human mage in charge of the support and ranged adventurers. “You call your targets, and we’ll adjust.”

The mage nodded and began barking orders to his people.

“This is going to get ugly,” Fowl said. “I’m just glad we aren’t on the outside edge.”

“That’s because we are only level thirty-eight. She put the higher level tanks outside.”

“Only… we have gained levels so fast, and that last boss…” Fowl stopped talking when Max coughed and motioned behind him.

“It was Fowl, right?” Brunhilde asked, her eyes peering out of a plate helm sporting massive horns on top.

“Yes, ma’am!”

A chuckle could be heard as the dwarven woman shook her head. “Be ready with that taunt. If I call for it, use it. Don’t do so otherwise. If you attract too many with it, I’m not sure we can save you.”

Fowl nodded as she turned and moved back to her spot.

“That’s a heck of a battle speech. You might die if you screw up,” teased Max.

“It’s why I have you. How do we want to play this?”

Max had already discussed it with Asher and Nuala, who were on the north side of this group. Off-tanking would be challenging, but it could be required at any moment. Their goal was to break the line, hold the outside, and then kill them from behind.

“I’ll support you by going for maiming blows. If we can leave them unable to move or walk, it’s a win in my book.”

Fowl grunted and began to rotate his shoulders.

A sharp whistle came, and everyone turned, looking across the grassy field toward where the treeline had been cut back to, half a mile away. They could easily see over a hundred ogres between them and the trees.

“Warriors ready! Fifty yards!”

Cursing under his breath, Max wished he hadn’t already used his Power Strike. Not having it would make things harder, and he could see now that out of every four or five ogres, there was one that carried the shield and sword combo, only this time, they wore plate armor instead of chainmail.

“Tell me we can win,” Fowl muttered, banging his shield with his hammer.

“You’re family. I won’t let you die.”

The moment Max spoke those words, the sound of laughter echoed inside his head.

“Help!” Fowl called out.

Max rushed forward, slashing at the ogre that was overwhelming Fowl. Two of the ones with a sword and shield had converged on him when Brunhilde called out for a taunt. They immediately abandoned the warriors on the right and left, freeing them up to assist with the wall of ogres trying to surround them.

Spells flew all around, ensnaring and rooting ogres, earth prisons holding a few back, and the occasional ice prison encasing one.

Two warriors were already down, requiring everyone to collapse closer and leaving them weakened against the forces in front of them.

The formation was falling apart, and Max slammed his hammer into the back of the knee of the ogre on the right of Fowl. A crunching sound resulted from Max’s attack, and the ogre stumbled, falling to the left side, and ended up on the ground.

Max spun, building up momentum and force as his sonar skill told him exactly where everyone nearby was, and then planted his feet, led with his hips, driving the halberd into the ogre's other leg, which was already in a bad position.

Another crunching sound came as both knees gave out, and the ogre fell the rest of the way to the dirt.

Fowl used the reprieve and backed up, reducing the number of ogres on him.

Every time he blocked an attack from the elite ogre, it smashed him back or to the side a few feet. Its size and momentum allowed it to control the momentum of their fight.

Max couldn’t help until he was certain the other ogre was out of commission. He ran up the grounded ogre’s back and drove the tip of his weapon into the gap between the ogre’s helmet and backplate. It shuddered and then went still as he sliced the spinal cord.

Max began running to help with the second one when another shape entered his Sonar skills range from behind.

It was coming fast, and he just had a moment to act.

Max ran at the ogre on Fowl and drove his spear into its lower back, severing its spine.

As the ogre pitched forward and Fowl moved to get out of the way, Max spun around, dropping low and to the side as a sword slashed through the space he had just been occupying.

Max already knew his attacker was different than every ogre he had faced so far as his sonar revealed more information than he expected.

Rolling and standing up, Max held his halberd out, parrying the second attack from an ogre wearing chain armor and dual-wielding long swords.

Its skin was different from the rest, a black color that reminded Max of the dungeon they had barely beaten, where he had almost burned to death.

The monstrous brute stood fourteen feet tall, and its seven-foot-long swords whistled through the air as it swung them at Max.

Dancing backward, dodging and weaving, Max sometimes parried and blocked with only fractions of an inch between the blades and his body.

“Someone taunt that!” Brunhilde called out.

“NO!” Max shouted, not letting himself get distracted. “Finish, then help!”

Curses came, and Max blocked out whatever Brunhilde and Diagon were shouting. He was in the hardest fight of his life as far as he could remember. No other boss had felt this close to killing him, and it was taking every bit of concentration while trusting his sonar and evasion skills to avoid getting cleaved into pieces by this ogre.

Sweat ran down his bald head, trying to get into his eyes. The parries and deflections with his weapon told Max that this thing was stronger than he was, a scary thought after previously having been the one who overpowered everything he fought.

The black eyes of the ogre were focused on him, its blades moving so fast they were a blur.

He had to make sure each place he stepped when he dodged wasn’t somewhere with a rock or hole lest he stumble and find himself dead a moment later.

A flash of something silver and bronze moved in the corner of his vision, and then Max felt two people entering his sonar range. A few seconds later, a third person approached him, and Max finally allowed himself to believe this would turn out all right.

“Taunting!”

The warrior that taunted was behind the creature and as the ogre spun, both swords coming around at its new target, Max saw that it was the warrior who had been next to Brunhilde.

“No!”

His words were too late as both swords connected only a second apart. The first sword hit the shield and forced the warrior’s arm and shield away from her body, leaving her open for the second sword, which cut clean through her plate armor, slicing her in half.

This is like watching me… we are outclassed…

The ogre roared, briefly studying its kill before turning on Brunhilde, who was shouting as she covered the last few steps between them.

The sound of metal on metal rang out as both the ogre's swords slammed into her shield. Another strike came, and Brunhilde parried it with her sword, losing a step or two each time she stopped one of the attacks.

"We need to freeze it!" Max shouted, glancing toward the mages, who were still supporting any warriors still standing.

"Help me," Brunhilde grunted between blows while being driven back toward the line of ogres the rest of the groups were fighting.

Max noticed Asher about to engage.

"Stop! Don't attack it!"

Asher froze two yards from the boss.

"It will kill you! We need an ice prison!"

The warrior glanced back and forth between Max and Brunhilde, who was struggling to stay standing. She had the ogre's attention, and Max could see small dents starting to form in her shield.

"TANILA! FREEZE!"

The next three seconds were the longest ones Max could remember in a while as the ogre assaulted the dwarf, who had not realized just how much she had bitten off.

Slowly, ice began to creep up the ogre's feet and legs. It howled and roared, trying to break free of the prison that was encasing it.

With only a moment to spare, Max took in the carnage before him. The back of their group was about to get overrun, the ogres having pressed around them. They could no longer stay where they were. Everyone would have to relocate and form up to the rear of the ogres.

"Seth!"

Tanila's voice sounded scared as he sensed something changing around him.

His sonar skill told him that the ogre was about to break free from the ice that was holding it fast.

A familiar aura of red that Max recognized covered the ogre. He had only seen it once before, and Brutus had almost died the last time he had.

"Berserker!"

Max wasn't sure who shouted it but the moment they did his heart sank.

People are going to die…

The ice shattered, and a heartbeat later, The ogre let out a roar that had Max wincing from the volume of it.

One moment Brunhilde was standing there, her eyes wide through her helmet's slits. The next moment, her body was cleaved into four pieces.

"BLIND!"

Max shouted, knowing of only one person who had that spell, and now it was a race against time.

The boss took two steps toward Fowl, crushing the warrior it had just slain under its feet.

Max cursed when he saw Fowl stumbling backward as he saw the ogre was coming at him.

"BLIND DAMNIT! BLIND!"

Chapter 125a - A Hunter is Paid

Chapter 125a - A Hunter is Paid - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

The clinking sound of the last bag of coins landing on top of the others sounded just as sweet as the first bag that had hit the floor.

"All three carts are unloaded, sir."

Smirking, the man simply nodded.

"Everyone else has left, correct?"

"They took the portal back after I had the last bag," the servant replied. "I'm certain they will be ready to tell the queens that we–"

Grunting and gasps came as the dagger plunged into the man's throat. He was dead. His brain just didn't know it.

"Shame you drew the short straw. I'm certain those girls won't mind that I kept one for myself."

Laughing, his voice echoed off the stone walls of the vault, which now contained hundreds of bags of gold piled on top of each other.

With a snap of his finger, the portal to where the carts had met him vanished, and he was safe in his own home.

Pulling out the folder that he had been handed when the transport arrived, he undid the red wax seal, watching as its magic vanished in a puff of blue light.

I would pity anyone who opened this besides me. That spell would have made them wish for a quick death.

Inside were the pages for his mark. Dozens of pages, with writing from a variety of people, listed information on *Max Hoste*.

“Now, who could you be, little bird, that the queens would risk bankrupting a kingdom to find and kill?”

Running his fingers down the first line, the finely manicured nail pointed at words he couldn’t believe.

“A black skill… surely…”

Every page went into the folder, and it was instantly placed in storage for safekeeping.

Bending down, he picked up the corpse and shook it, staring into the blank eyes.

“WHY?! Why did no one tell me this boy really had a black skill?! I could have charged so much more!”

The corpse flew and splattered into paste against the worked stone bricks surrounding his vault.

Huffing and clenching his fists, the knowledge that he had missed out on so much more money angered him.

It took a few deep breaths to calm himself and unclench his hands, the bones almost cracking from the pressure he had squeezed with.

Tsking his tongue, he stared at the mess he had made and sighed.

“Oh, Max Hoste… run while you can, little man. When I find you, you’ll never know I was there.”

Laughing, he walked through the metal door that was a foot thick, letting it close behind him without a sound.

As the door shut, his laughter was cut off, and all that remained behind was enough wealth to purchase a kingdom.

And a growing pile of mush that slid off the wall and to the floor.

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

OK so - I messed up - I TOTALLY mis set dates..

Normally I would have a full chapter with a half chapter... unfortunately with my sons MRI appointment and doctors visit I don't have the time to redo all the chapters for the next 40+ chapters :(

I am so sorry so please don't stone me :(

126 - Pinched Between Lines

126 - Pinched Between Lines - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“BLIND DAMNIT! BLIND!”

The ogre stopped running, stumbling a few steps, and waved its swords randomly at nothing.

Max's options were limited, and He knew he had no choice. Fowl was going to die if he didn’t do something.

“AIR WALL IT! WAIT TILL BLIND DROPS! EARTH WALL IT! KEEP IT BLOCKED FROM FOWL! ”

Max wasn’t sure if the other casters would work together or even do what he asked, but there wasn’t a moment to lose.

Running up behind the boss, he activated Stealth and thrust the halberd at the ogre’s right hip. He prayed what he was attempting would work. Its back was covered by chainmail that hung down over its arse.

As the tip pierced through those links, Max felt a little bit of hope, watching the blade slide through the metal that protected the boss’s hip, driving into the tender flesh and feeling it touch the joint he was aiming for.

Max felt a sword coming for him as a crack filled the air.

A wall of earth appeared, but the blade smashed through it unimpaired and slammed into the shaft of his halberd.

The force of the blow yanked Max’s weapon free from the ogre’s leg while sending the halberd crashing against his chest.

Time seemed to stop, and the next thing Max recalled was the pain in his chest and lungs. His right arm hurt, and his left arm was broken.

Trying to move, Max realized most of his body wasn’t working.

[Regeneration]

Blood came up as he coughed. He felt the bones shifting in his arms and hands, letting him know he had broken more than he had initially thought.

During all this, Max could only watch Fowl’s health bar.

When Max could finally use his arms again, he wiped the blood from his face. He felt the chainmail against his eyes but didn't care as he frantically cleared his vision.

Fowl stood thirty yards away. Still alive somehow. The boss was under attack from every mage and archer, and a group of warriors were working together to keep it at bay.

Max took his first deep breath in a while since being struck and saw why they were winning.

The ogre’s right leg wasn’t working. It hadn’t shattered as he had hoped, but something must have been injured so that the ogre could no longer walk.

Scanning the area, Max searched for his halberd. It was time to end this, and he would be the one to do it.

That’s right… you want this kill… you need this kill…

Shut up! If you won’t help without some unreasonable request, just shut it!

He ran for his halberd, moving further away from Fowl and the others. Max almost dropped the weapon just as he picked it up when he heard the voice speak again.

Very well. Consider this a gift to show I can be generous when I wish to.

A cold sensation flowed through him, and Max blinked as a notification appeared.

[Power Strike Available]

“About damn time,” Max growled as he ran toward the fight.

Max looked at Tanila as he returned and raised his halberd, giving her the signal they had worked out before.

She raised both hands, and he saw a smile on her face.

Here, covered in sweat with everyone exhausted from the fight, she smiled, and it filled him with something he hadn’t believed was possible.

They could do this. They could hold back the horde.

His legs churned, every bit of his strength driving him toward the creature he needed to defeat.

When Max was ten yards away from the ogre, he saw a stone wall forming, angled as Tanila knew he needed it.

Fury flowed through him. Max wished he could attack this way from the front to see the ogre’s eyes as he killed it.

Every ounce of power he had flowed through his legs, hips, and arms as he swung his halberd and used the gift his skill had given him.

[Power Strike]

The placement was perfect. The blade glowed as it sliced just slightly above the ogre’s shoulder. When the axe connected with the ogre’s neck armor, the same power that had killed Brunhilde killed it.

Max stumbled and fell from the momentum of the swing. Tumbling off the stone platform, Max rolled and stood up in time to see the ogre’s head landing on the dirt in the field.

He saw something in its dead eyes staring at him and wide open jaw with massive teeth.

Shock.

Max realized he was staring into the eyes of something that believed it couldn’t be killed by the enemy it was facing.

In those fading dark eyes, he saw himself.

Do I walk that same line? Believing nothing can kill me? That everythi–

That last thought was interrupted when Max was knocked to the ground. It felt like a blizzard had encased him in ice as a cold far deeper than any he had ever felt roared through him.

[6 Strength Consumed]

[6 Constitution Consumed]

[Consume has Consumed a Higher Rank Skill]

[Berserker - Common has been upgraded to Berserker - Uncommon]

[Consume has Consumed a Higher Rank Skill]

[Dual Wield- Common has been upgraded to Dual Wield- Rare]

Max stumbled as he rose, his body betraying him as it struggled to handle the shock.

“Everyone to us!”

Max recognized Fowl’s voice as he shouted.

He heard and sensed everyone as they moved to where he was. He looked up and saw his dwarven friend moving past the creature that had just fallen to his weapon. Fowl snatched the head and deposited it into his storage.

“Get up! We've got to shift!” Fowl shouted at Max as he turned to check on the other groups approaching them.

Using his halberd for support, Max stood. He could see the looks the others were giving him. The healers looked tired, as did the mages.

Arrows continued to rain down upon the ogres that, chasing adventurers, moved from the circle that began flanking their rear.

“We need to stay! There isn’t a place to defend, and soon, another wave will come, pinning us between them!” Diagon yelled at Fowl. “You’re going to get us all killed!”

Finally, on his feet, Max saw that only half of those present when the six groups had joined up remained. Most of the warriors were gone. Besides Max, only Fowl, Asher, Nuala, and one other warrior remained.

Over ten ogres were coming at them, and Max could tell that the healers would soon run out of mana.

“Listen!” Max shouted, cutting off Fowl, who was about to respond to Diagon. “We have one chance! We cut a path and run! We can get to the city, fight there, and see if any others are able to help!”

As he yelled, Max pointed at Nuala and Fowl. “You two, outer edges. Me and the other two warriors will lead. I’ll drop back when we break through. Mages stop every ogre you can and then burn down the three in the middle. Archers, don’t leave any skills unused!”

Diagon was about to reply when an arrow flew past him from one of the archers near Max. A roar sounded behind him, and when Diagon spun around, he saw an arrow embedded in the eye of an ogre racing toward him.

“Go now!”

Max didn’t wait. As he ran, he smiled at Tanila. He could see she was exhausted, but her smile helped him press on.

Fowl and Nuala moved instantly, as did Asher, who came running on Max’s heels. The other warrior was only a few steps behind as everyone, but Diagon, obeyed the man who had just killed the ogre they all knew that would have slaughtered them all.

“Wait!” Diagon shouted as they all rushed past him, the mage seemingly confused at the change in leadership.

Max cursed as he ran past the man, who couldn’t seem to see there was only one option left. Running wasn’t foolish when it meant you could fight again.

His halberd swung, taking the ogre that had been shot in the eye's leg off below the knee.

“Cripple and move!” Max shouted as he dashed to the left, engaging another ogre approaching the group. “Freeze that advanced one!”

Max feinted. The ogre he faced was a standard elite, not one with a shield and sword. It swung its weapon, only to find its arm missing from the elbow after Max dodged and sliced in one go.

“You two get that one in the middle!” Max ordered Asher and the other warrior.

Spinning around, Max saw Fowl and Nuala.

“Mages bind or ensnare those four! Fowl and Nuala move up! Archers harass and move!”

Every ten seconds or so, Max issued new commands, his sonar keeping tabs on who was where and what was coming.

In under two minutes they had broken through the line of ogres, never staying in one location longer than twenty seconds when possible.

Everyone ran, sweat pouring down their bodies as the sun continued to shine, a bright light in such a dark moment.

Max moved back with Fowl, keeping tabs on what was coming up from behind while the other warriors and archers took down the few ogres between them and the city's outer edges.

“What do we do?” Fowl asked after Max returned from hacking the leg of an ogre running after them. “They are going to reach the outer city.”

“We fight in the street, keep falling back,” Max replied, pointing at an ogre with a shield and sword that had broken free from an ensnare.

Tanila nodded, and another set of roots rose, binding it.

“Keep going!” Max shouted as the group ahead slowed, making sure that Max and the others were not too far behind.

Tanila, Fowl, Batrire, and Max all ran to catch up, and Tanila started to chuckle.

“What’s funny?” Fowl asked.

“Did you see Diagon’s face?” Tanila replied. “That man is not happy he isn’t in charge and that Max’s plan worked. To think he was willing to die instead of run.”

“I was about to stick my foot up his arse if he didn’t move,” Max added. “People forget that levels aren’t everything.”

Batrire snorted, gaining everyone's attention. “You all noticed your level, right? We are level thirty-nine!”

Fowl started grunting, and Max rolled his eyes as the other two noticed their levels.

“Sorry, I was too busy trying not to let Fowl die back there,” Tanila teased. “Good thing Seth knows exactly how to stop a beserked ogre.”

“Shhhhh,” Batrire hushed her. “We can talk about that later. It looks like things got bad for the other groups as well!”

Looking where Batrire was pointing, they saw other groups engaged with a horde of ogres around the houses and shops at the outer edges of the city limits.

“Crap,” Fowl grunted as the four of them started to run faster. “There has to be at least thirty or more there!”

Max glanced behind them and saw the slim lead they had on the wall of ogres.

“We need to get deeper into the city,” he stated as they ran. “We can’t win the fight on the edges. All we can do is slow them down until they reach the walls.”

“What about the people that haven’t fled?”

Max shook his head at Tanila. “If they didn’t listen to the evacuation order, we can't help. If this is happening on all four sides of the city, other sections may be worse.”

Running ahead of the other three, Max raced to catch up to the groups they had fought with.

“We need to get in the streets and fight there! Give up ground as we must, but get to the streets!”

“What about those ahead?” Diagon shouted back. “We can help them!”

Frowning, Max felt every eye on him as the adventurers turned to see what he would say.

Being in charge sucks...

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

Hey all!

I appreciate the love Friday - I headed to Dallas for a child neurosurgeon today to get their opinion on what to do for our son.

Some had asked. Here is the image of the cyst he apparently has had since he was born (didn't find out till seizure a few weeks back)

Appreciate the thoughts and prayers.

I also wanted to say thank you for making Ultimate Level 1 so successful!

Who would have believed I'd make #1 on Fantasy's Action and Adventure tag?

127 - Fighting On the Streets

[127 - Fighting On the Streets - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“Fine! Everyone choose now! Hands up if we try to help the other adventurers or keep them down if we push through and defend inside the streets.”

Diagon’s hand went up immediately, and then he turned around, noticing that no one else wanted to raise theirs. Even the two people from his own party kept their hands down. Diagon growled, frustrated at no one voting with him.

“Let it go, Diagon,” the dwarf healer from his group said. “We need to focus–”

“No!” Diagon shouted, cutting off his friend. “I’m going to help, even if the rest of you won’t!”

His team's shocked look told everyone Diagon had just left his party as the mage ran toward the massive pack of ogres.

“Seth?”

Max sighed and said, “We can’t. We need to move. Chasing him would get all of us killed. Let’s go while we can.”

It took a moment, and as Max’s group pushed past everyone, the footsteps behind them were the only sound anyone made for the next few minutes.

“Mages, burn that one! Archers, focus on the two on the right!”

Max smiled as Tanila barked out orders. The archers were on top of the roofs of the buildings on the street, and they were raining arrows down on all the ogres that continued to press into the city.

Over a quarter mile of streets had been given up as they fell back, continually killing the ogres that crashed through the city. A few houses had been knocked down, cutting off part of a street, as Max took any opportunities that came, slamming the ogres he crippled into the buildings and letting the rubble create choke points.

“How long?” Fowl shouted as he tanked two ogres, waiting for Asher to help while Max continued to assist Nuala.

“Three minutes! Be ready!”

Grunts of acknowledgments came from everyone, trusting in the healers and mages who would do everything in their power to keep everyone alive.

An explosion shook one of the roofs when a shaman behind six ogres sent a fireball at the archers.

A scream came, and Max looked at the wreckage, seeing one of the archers on fire and falling toward the ground.

An air shield appeared under the archer, and he rolled off, thudding into the street.

“We got him!” one of the healers shouted, and Max focused back on the ogres pressing them.

How many have we killed? A hundred?

Everywhere in the street were ogres they had killed or immobilized. The shamans had healed the ones who weren't crippled. Occasionally, Max's group destroyed houses, burying their enemies to help stem the flow of the shamans.

A cry jolted Max from his thoughts. Nuala was being assaulted by two of the higher-tier ogres. Even though she had gained a few levels, it wasn't enough to make that fight one she could handle alone.

Groaning, Max hacked at the ogre he was facing. Unleashing a combo of four different moves with his halberd finally resulted in cutting the hand off of the elite ogre. Losing its sword, the creature roared, but Max ignored it, moving to end the fight. Bringing his halberd around, he swung the blade at the ogre's chest, letting it block the strike with its shield, and then drove the metal weight on the end into its knee, shattering the joint and sending the creature tumbling to the left.

As it fell, Max twisted and turned, his sonar skill reading every movement of the ogre.

Max swung his weapon, removing its head in a single strike.

With his target down, Max moved quickly, knowing he only had a moment to help before another ogre would replace the one he had just killed.

"Stonewall!"

Before he had finished shouting his request, Tanila already had a wall rising up, providing a ramp for Max to run up. He came from behind, removing the head of the higher-tier ogre on his right. Jumping from the stone ramp, Max slashed down and cut through the elbow joint of the ogre's shield arm. Rolling a moment as he landed, Max lashed out with his halberd and drove the tip through the back of the ogre's knee, sending it crashing to the ground.

"Fall back!"

His sonar was filled with the movement of four ogres moving toward them.

"Destroy those buildings!" Tanila shouted.

Fireballs flew from the mages, who spent precious mana on their attack spells. The houses erupted in fire, and the walls began to crumble. They crashed down into the street on both sides, landing on the ogres too close to dodge the debris.

Max ran to where Fowl and Asher were, helping by removing an ogre's leg below the knee.

Archers sent two arrows, the green glow of skills visible for just a moment, impaling the face of the second ogre Fowl was tanking.

"Run!"

Everyone turned, racing down the street as the buildings behind them continued to crash onto the paved stones.

"Less than one hundred arrows left!"

Max looked at Huethea and saw the elf firing an arrow at the ogres approaching their new defensive position.

“What then?!”

After firing off another arrow, she turned, and Max saw her shrug. “We have to pull back to the walls! We’re useless in these tight quarters without arrows!”

“We have less than thirty percent mana left!” Tanila announced as Max turned to look at her.

“Elf tits,” Max muttered, ignoring the snort from Nuala. “Three minutes! After that, we fall back all the way!”

Turning to face the horde that stretched as far as the eye could see, Max spotted an ogre off in the distance and cursed.

“Huethea! Tell me that isn’t another one!”

“It is! Fifty ogres deep, but it's pushing through! There’s a second one further back also!”

“FALL BACK! Burn those buildings down!”

Max spun and saw everyone looking at him.

“We can’t risk it! Now! Save ten percent mages! We need to run!”

Max saw people dashing toward the city walls and the guards trying to assist those carrying their belongings as they made their way to safety.

Everyone was on the ground, running as a pack. Behind them, over a quarter of a mile away, was an army of ogres that had pushed past their attempts to slow them down.

“They won’t make the walls,” Fowl stated between breaths.

Max nodded, looking at his friend, sweat running down his face. Fowl and Nuala had taken their helmets off, enjoying a chance to breathe a little easier as they fled.

“We can’t win… but if we don’t defend the people…” Tanila said as she ran next to Max. “How many will die?”

“The guards can’t help either,” Nuala said. “They aren’t able to deal with this kind of battle.”

“How much time do we need to give them?”

Everyone looked at the walls, still almost three-quarters of a mile away, and the throng of people trying to reach the city.

“Not enough,” Owen answered. “We need to send someone to tell them to drop everything and run. Perhaps a few guards can assist, but we don’t have the mana to heal them. The question is, are we willing to die to let them live?”

“Isn’t that what we signed up for?” Nuala replied.

“Osonia, go and tell the guards we will try to buy time. We will fight as long as we can.”

Max’s order was met with a few grunts and nods since no one wanted to hide behind the walls while watching the people trusting them to stop this outbreak be cut down.

Osonia handed her arrows to Huethea and took off running. Max watched as she covered the ground far faster than the pace the whole group was moving.

“Ok, give me ideas. How can we buy the most time? We got no mana, limited arrows, and an army of ogres, with ones that almost killed us all mixed in.”

The shifting of feet and awkward expressions told the truth everyone knew. This was suicide, and all they could do was last as long as possible.

“Surely, they are going to clear the dungeon soon,” Huethea said. “It’s been over three hours.”

“I pray for that every minute that passes,” Batrire replied. “We can hope, but there is no guarantee. If ours is this bad, I can only imagine how the other three are and how hard those dungeons might be.”

Max ignored the conversation as he considered the street they were on. “What street is this? Is it a main one?”

“What?” Fowl asked, hearing Max’s random question. “Main street?”

“Yes! Is this a main street or a side street?”

Everyone looked around, and Huethea knew what Max was wondering. She took off running down a side street.

“Stay here!” Max yelled as he ran down the same street as Huethea but in the other direction.

Not caring who saw how fast he ran, Max reached the end of the block and turned, swearing the second he saw what he feared.

Loud roars rang out, and less than a hundred yards away, ogres were coming down the street.

Spinning around, Max raced back, looking at Huethea, who was also returning.

“Ogres!” she shouted as they raced back to the others. “Not far at all!”

“We need to run!” Max shouted as they both arrived at the same time. “We’re about to be pinched on both sides!”

Everyone ran toward the people who had started running, leaving items lying all over the ground.

“GO!” Max shouted again as he reached the throng of people.

“There are too many!” a Sergeant shouted back. “They will trample each other if we push them harder!”

“Seth!” Tanila’s cry brought him back to the problem at hand.

The ogres came, seven wide, and only a half dozen rows were between them and one of the ogres they all feared. Its shoulders and head rose above the waves of snarling faces. From the side streets, they saw more ogres coming toward them and the people they were trying to defend.

“Fan out! Prepare to hold! Save your bow skills for the big boss!”

Max tightened his hands around the shaft of his weapon.

Inside Max’s mind was an itch, begging him to let his will go and surrender everything to the voice in his head.

“We can’t win.”

Glancing at Nuala, who stood beside him, he saw her shaking. Fear had them all in its clutches, and facing death was hard when one knew they could flee and live. All it would cost was their promise to defend the weak.

“Remember why we fight! Remember our promise!” Max shouted.

It took a moment, but he saw Nuala stand a little straighter, her shield and weapon no longer shaking as they had a moment ago.

Sounds of battle rang out from the streets on the other sides of the buildings. No one was behind him that they could see, but everyone was certain about the noise coming from nearby.

“Huethea, get on the roof! Tell us what you see!” Max yelled as he ran to a building and stored his weapon, holding his hands out as he bent down.

The female elf ran toward him, putting her bow away, and jumped into his hands. Sending her soaring through the air, Max launched her up and onto the two-story building. She darted off over the roof, and Max brought his weapon back out, moving to his spot near Nuala.

“It’s the factions! They're coming!”

A sigh of relief came from everyone as they heard the words they had anxiously waited for.

Appearing on the roof and looking down at them, Max saw a smile on the elf’s face that ran from ear to ear.

“They are clearing this street next to us!”

Grinning, Max pointed at the ogres who had just come from the side streets and were approaching them.

“Let’s do this!” he shouted as he ran toward them, his halberd poised to attack.

Everyone with him cheered as they ran to meet the enemy, knowing help had arrived. They just needed to hold on a little longer.

128 - Checking In

https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/76259/ultimate-level-1-litrpg-book-3-stubs-june-30th/chapter/1589009/128-checking-in

Everyone celebrated. They only had to hold off the horde of ogres for another ten minutes before two factions came to assist.

The Red Horde and the Enlightened Souls had arrived, their higher-tier adventurers cutting down the creatures like a threshing blade slicing through wheat.

Max stood stunned, watching two dwarves and a human from the Red Horde plow through ogres without stopping at all. The female human was a damage-based attacker, and with both dwarves supporting her, every strike of her two swords cut a creature in half. Even the higher-level elite ogre, like the one that almost killed Fowl, was taken down by her with a single strike.

“Makes me feel a little less of a man,” Fowl sighed.

“That’s just because you’re small,” Batrire teased as everyone got a moment to recover from the last few hours. “I love you even if you are half a man.”

The others they had fought with chuckled, and Fowl smiled as he gave his better half a gesture with his middle finger.

“What are you all going to do?” Huethea asked as Max moved toward the corpses to start looting.

“As in right now or later?” Max replied as he picked up two swords and stored them.

“It’s obvious your group works well together. I’m certain some of those who lost their friends might be interested in filling that fifth spot you seem to have open.”

Max turned and looked at the people she was talking about. They had fought well, and it was evident they had talent, but trusting someone with their secrets wouldn’t be easy.

“Is this your way of asking if we have room?” Max teased before moving toward his real target.

Huethea chuckled and shook her head. “Are you kidding me? If I left, Asher would take over, and soon he would find another female and try to make a harem or something.”

Coughing, Max snorted and looked at Asher, seeing that the man was talking it up with a few female adventurers from the other parties.

“Wouldn’t Owen get upset?” Max asked as he finally reached the elite ogre, took both of its swords and stored them.

“Owen? No… he has a crush on Asher. Besides, I don’t think your mage would want me in your party. I can tell how she looks at you, and you look at her.”

Max felt his cheeks turn a little warmer. He could see that Tanila was watching him and Huethea talk, smiling when she saw him looking at her.

“Yeah… I think that would probably be best, too. I don’t think we are looking for another right now. After we hit the tower, I know it will have to happen, but for now, we’ll just keep fighting as a foursome.”

Smiling, Huethea offered her hand to Max. “Thank you again for keeping us alive. It’s obvious you’re stronger than the rest of us, but you never once treated us as weaker people.”

Shaking her hand, Max nodded. “You and your crew handled everything without problems too. That Nuala is a pretty good tank. As someone without an archer, I can see the perk of having one.”

Huethea hesitated, and Max could see she wanted to ask something.

“What is it?”

Biting her lip, Huethea sighed and nodded. “The rumors… with what you did in the Colosseum and what people say you defeated in the streets… I wouldn’t have believed any of that, but after watching you…” she hesitated, grimacing for a moment. “Be safe. I know some of our kind don’t like humans, but you’re obviously not like most, from how your mage treats you to how you hold yourself. If you have a problem with a certain group, just keep an eye out. I owe you for helping my team stay alive. If I hear something, where can I send a message?”

Max stared at Huethea and realized that the enemies he had made must be even more dangerous than he believed if she was this bold. “We are staying at the Heavenly Pineapple. Hopefully, you’ll only need to come by to celebrate something. I’d rather not have any more run-ins with the group you’re talking about.”

Huethea grunted.

“You all not going to loot?” Max asked as he grabbed another weapon and put it in his storage.

“We will, but in case you haven’t noticed, everyone is giving you first dibs.”

Max realized she was right, rubbed his bald head with his gloved hand, and groaned.

“Stop standing around and come get some loot, you fools! We all did this! It's time to gather enough to afford all the drinks we’ll be enjoying tonight!”

Laughter came as the pack of adventures descended upon the dead ogres, stuffing weapons and armor into their storage.

“Good talk?” Tanila asked, winking as she moved next to Max.

“It was. She wanted to know if we needed another female elf in our party but I said no. There is only one female elf I need.”

Max saw Tanila’s face turn bright red, and her eyes widened as she stared at him. “That… is good to hear,” she finally replied, smiling at him.

Nodding his head once, Max winked and moved to join the others still looting. He laughed as he removed items from the dead and offered them to those nearby.

“What are you going to do?” Batrire asked, having snuck up behind Tanila. “When are you going to tell him?”

Tanila bit her lip and sucked in some air, creating small noises as she watched Max encouraging the people they had just fought with. “I have no idea… I mean… how would he respond?”

Batrire snorted as she put her hand on her friend's arm and squeezed. “You and I both know how that man responds. No matter how bad things get, he is committed to us. He is committed to you.”

Batrire felt her friend tremble slightly at those last words and gave her one last squeeze before putting her hand against Tanila’s back and giving her a slight shove. “Now get in there and loot something. We need to raise some money.”

“At least we aren’t having to collect ogre balls this time,” Tanila declared, smiling as she let Batrire move her forward. “I’m not sure I can handle that task anytime soon, though.”

“That’s what we got Fowl for,”’ Batrire replied. “Besides, he’s closer to the ground than you and I.”

Both women laughed as they moved through the carnage on the streets. No one mentioned the number of houses burning and knocked down or how that would impact the lives of those who lived there.

Soon, every corpse would be gone in twenty or thirty minutes, and the people who had escaped because of their actions could begin to rebuild.

Max and the others waited at the counter, watching the attendant review the information they had provided. The adventurer hall was not as full as they had hoped, and word was coming back about the number of men and women who had died defending the city.

“It seems pretty quiet in here compared to usual,” Fowl muttered. “Just how bad was it?”

Their female elf attendant raised her head from the papers she was looking at and frowned at his question.

“You were there and saw firsthand how bad it got,” she replied, her voice steady but on edge. “The news was that all four dungeons were worse than usual. We have not seen a breakout like this in a very long time. If what we know already holds true…” she paused, looking around at who might be close enough to hear. “Ten percent of all the adventurers in the city who went out perished.”

Fowl let out a low whistle for a moment before Batrire elbowed him.

“We owe you and the other adventurers who defended the city more than just points for one's rank. We won’t know the actual contribution points towards your next rank, but know it will be one of the highest rewards given in ages,” their attendant said. “I should be good with what you have here. In a few days, expect an announcement from the guild regarding rewards.”

She turned and took three steps before stopping and returning to them as they were about to leave. “I meant to ask, and I know we normally do not inquire about such a thing, but what level are you at now? Reports indicate that the experience given was also higher than usual.”

“Gods, it was!” exclaimed Fowl. “We’re all almost forty-one now!”

Her eyes squinted, and she looked at all of them, who nodded. “Are you certain the number you listed as total slain is correct?”

Max could see the thoughts going through the attendant's head. “Honestly, we don’t know. For over three hours, we fought nonstop. Taking a count wasn’t really on our minds. Our biggest concern was staying alive while protecting the others with us and those who hadn’t escaped the town. Once the wave came with those elite ogres, we had no choice but to fall back and try to defend inside the city.”

She nodded, and Max could see and sense her making a checkmark on her clipboard. “That does make more sense. Thank you again, adventurers. Now, don’t forget to stop by the potion counter. Each of you has four potions waiting for you.”

Rubbing his hands together, Fowl smiled as the others groaned. “What? Free potions!”

“I can’t take him anywhere,” Batrire muttered as they made their way toward the small line waiting at the counter giving away potions.

“Nope, but at least we know the way to his heart,” teased Max. “Potions and ale.”

“And food!” chimed in Fowl. “A dwarf's gotta eat.”

They all laughed as they moved toward the line, glad that today's event was finally over.

“I must admit, what Everett told me about you four left me a bit surprised, but after hearing what happened outside those walls and seeing everything you brought back, it has to be true.”

Max nodded as he tried to get a read on Tom, their liaison and soon-to-be trainer with the Golden Axe faction. The man had an air around him that seemed to vibrate with power. His hair was salt and pepper, and his body was brimming with muscles that defied his age. The man had to be at least fifty, but he stood over six feet tall, and Max could tell a fight with him wouldn't be easy.

“Now, I have been told an insane amount of money has been put in a fund for you four within our faction’s bank. If there is something specific you all need to be bought or crafted, I will be the one to work with. Even though you cannot officially take part in the tower climbs, Everett has informed me that you can get training and use the shard we have upon reaching level fifty.”

Max’s head almost snapped from the speed at which it moved when the other three members of his party all began to cough and react to Tom’s last statement.

“The alliance has a training shard?!” Tanila asked her face not hiding her disbelief at such a statement.

Tom smiled, his lips pulling back and displaying a set of teeth that looked impossibly straight and white. “We do. Seven of the twelve factions in the city have one. Some of the rest are in the process of getting one, but the cost… well, let’s just say it doesn’t come cheap. That is why faction wars have been called off for a while. In the past, factions were not against backstabbing and betrayal to get their hands on one. After many higher-tier adventurers died in those pointless skirmishes, the kings and queens used their influence to stop them.”

“How much cheaper are they compared to the adventurer hall?” Fowl asked as he leaned against the counter, which held a massive collection of weapons and armor they had looted from the ogres.

Tom grunted as he shook his head slowly. “For you four, apparently, a lot. If one of you is prepared to raise a skill to epic, I was told you can do it for free. The rest would have to pay half price.”

“And for legendary?” Fowl asked, his eyes almost twinkling with excitement.

Tom laughed so loud that it echoed off every wall in the decently sized room they were in. He shook his head and put one hand on his chest. After settling down, Tom leaned forward and held Fowl’s gaze.

“You and your friends will need to accomplish a lot in order to raise a skill to that level. As you know, the power required to grant that is massive and does not come cheap.”

Sighing, Fowl nodded and moved back from the counter. “Can’t blame a dwarf for asking, can you?”

Snorting, Tom shook his head. “Yes… yes, I can.”

129 - Secrets and Dungeons

https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/76259/ultimate-level-1-litrpg-book-3-stubs-june-30th/chapter/1590526/129-secrets-and-dungeons

“You’re wasting power! Focus on one leg, then let it travel up from there!”

Tanila grunted and nodded, waiting for her ensnare ability to come off cooldown. Once it was ready, she raised a hand, and Tom began jogging around the training field.

“He is something else, isn’t he?” Fowl asked, massaging his neck with a hand. “I didn’t think he’d kick my arse so easily or so fast.”

Max nodded, hearing Fowl’s question but watching Tanila as she tried to follow their trainer's instructions.

A few hours ago, they arrived after a good night's sleep and got their first real experience sparring with a tower climber.

Others stopped and watched as Fowl and Max sparred with Tom, occasionally cheering them on or letting out a groan. It was as if they felt the man's years of experience firsthand.

Tanila had not realized all the little tricks her spells had to them. Tom demonstrated to her some new combinations of ways to use her spells. He had been shocked to discover that she had elemental mastery but said nothing, reminding them again that their skills and abilities were secrets known only to him and Everett.

The roots sprang up as Tom's foot was about to hit the ground, vines reaching up first and grabbing his ankle and foot. The older man was fast and quick, but he was playing fair. He was not using his strength or speed to break or prevent her spell from landing but helping Tanila understand how to hold down a target better.

As the first foot was ensnared, the roots reached out, helping to lock down Tom's other foot and leg.

"Good! Much better! The timing on that was your best yet!"

After praising her, Tom strode toward her, ripping the roots and vines off his legs as if they were nothing more than a piece of string.

"That's insane," Fowl muttered. "I'm not sure even you could do that."

Max nodded, smirking as he saw the actual difference in power. Inside him, the voice had already mentioned multiple times how powerful Max could have become if Tom had met an unfortunate fate.

"I think you four are about as ready as a group can be," Tom said after he got near the four of them. "Let's talk tactics real quick since I heard how things went the last time you ventured into the dungeons below your current level."

"The centaurs are tough, as you learned. Their ability to kite you makes getting close very difficult, and much falls upon Tanila's shoulders. She has to lock them down, and you have to close that gap. If they run off and bring friends, it will only get worse. Not having a fifth person," Tom held up his hand, stopping Fowl from what he was about to say, "makes this harder, and yes, I know you're not looking for one right now. Eventually, you need to consider an archer or another mage. Realize each of these dungeons is based on some of the tower floors. Some floors might only take a day or two to beat while others up near the top can take months."

Max wanted to gag at that possibility even though he already knew it. Spending a month on a floor was difficult to imagine.

"The spider dungeon is one you need to try and eventually beat. We have potions you can get here to help with poison, but there are tactics they use that are best learned now instead of inside the tower."

Holding up his third finger, Tom frowned. "The giant apes… those things are, pardon the pun, beasts. They have a higher strength than most adventurers, especially the ones wearing plate armor. They are fast and have a solid amount of health. Add in their intelligence, group tactics, and, as you mentioned from your only visit, calling for reinforcements."

Tom crossed his arms as he stared at them. "This is only the beginning of creatures like that. The dungeons are all about learning how to overcome these things. Your rise through the tower can only happen if you know how to do that before you get somewhere, and suddenly twenty monsters are attacking. And please, please do not go into the level forty dungeons until we've helped you prepare for them."

Max nodded, having already read up on them, and realized how bad things would get.

“Any questions?”

Everyone looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Good,” Tom said with a single nod. “Now, Fowl, Tanila, and Batrire go inside and get six potions to cure poison. I need a word with Seth for a moment since it appears he is your leader.”

The three of them glanced at Max and then at Tom but nodded and moved toward the faction house.

Once they were gone, Tom turned his attention to Max, who did his best not to shift under the man’s gaze.

“So, are you going to be honest with me about what level you really are?”

Tom’s question caught Max a little off guard, but he’d known it would come at some point.

“Does it matter?” Max replied, watching as Tom’s expression didn’t change.

“No,” he answered, rubbing his chin with a finger. “The problem with sparring with me is that I have spent years with adventurers like yourself. You move faster than most rogues and hit harder than you should. I’ve done some research and know your gear is good enough to potentially come close to what I suspect your stats are. Based on how you handle my attacks and combos, I also have an idea of your skills.”

Tom took a step and got right up next to Max. “If I didn’t know better, I would say you are at level fifty. Maybe even a few levels higher. This leads me to wonder why you are grouping with those three except how I see you and your mage look at each other.”

Max’s heart felt like it was trying to set a new record for how fast it could beat. He was doing everything within his power not to react to what Tom was saying.

“Listen to me carefully. I want you to know I won’t tell Everett or anyone else about your level. Do what you want, but know if you desire a trip into the tower, I’ll gladly just take you with me. I have no doubt you would pass the level check, and you could quickly rise in power based on what I’ve seen today. Yet if you do, we both know you can’t help your friends anymore. You would level too quickly, and they wouldn’t get any experience if that gap became too great.”

Nodding once, Max kept his mouth shut.

“I heard what you did to that boy in the arena. If you were level thirty, I guess the rumors of you heading into dungeons alone and fighting alone have also got to be true.”

Max couldn’t help it, his eyes narrowed at Tom’s words.

Tom chuckled and grinned. “Yes, people notice when a warrior heads off by himself toward dungeons. Even Dexic mentioned that you were standing outside the troll dungeon like a fool, ‘*wanting to test your weapon*’ against one of them.”

Groaning, Max took a deep breath and let it out. “She told you about that?”

Howling with laughter, Tom finally coughed after he stopped and nodded. “She told me she finally met someone as dumb as I was. I often tried dungeons solo because I had gotten fortunate with an item that helped me level alone. That would explain the growth and how you are further ahead of your friends.”

Tom’s hand reached out and grabbed Max’s shoulder. “Not to mention the experience you would have gained if the rumor about what you faced on the street was true.”

A slight twitch of his eye made Tom nod, and the man removed his hand and leaned back.

“I said all that to now say this. Be careful with them. If you do all of the work, they will depend too much on you, and there *will* come a time when you can’t save them. They need to know how to handle themselves. That is why I was much harder with them after we sparred.”

Max gestured he understood with his head.

“I’m assuming they know?”

“They do,” Max replied.

“Good. Secrets between a group at this stage in one's adventuring career are dangerous. Better that each person knows and trusts the others completely.”

Tom’s attention turned toward the faction house, where he could see Tanila, Batrire, and Fowl all exiting.

“Now listen to what I’m about to say, and please believe me when I say this. Do not go into the dungeons for the last ten levels alone. No matter how strong you think you are, one mistake can cost you your life. What you will face as your group makes it to level fifty will be worse than what you faced outside the walls yesterday. Do you understand?”

Max nodded.

“Good. Now, go join your group and have fun in that spider dungeon. Just remember, take things slow and check every shadow. Those damn spiders love to hide.”

Tom stuck out his hand, and Max shook it. Tom then turned and moved off toward another area on the training grounds where two other faction members were sparring, leaving Max to meet his friends.

“That looked interesting,” Tanila said when they reached where Max was standing. “Everything ok?”

Nodding, Max shrugged. “Seems Tom is a lot smarter than I realized. He knows I’m stronger than you all.”

Each of his three friends' eyes shifted between where Tom was across the training area and back to Max.

“As in…” Fowl said, waiting for Max to explain.

“As in, he believes I’m level fifty, and I need to be careful and not protect you all too much. I was also told I shouldn’t go into the level forty to fifty dungeons by myself.”

Batrire winced. “That’s it?”

“No,” Max replied, shaking his head. “I can share more in the dungeon. For now, we need to try out this spider one. Tom said it’s going to be fun.”

“On me!” Fowl shouted as the two spiders he saw spinning their webs came at him along the stone floor. The tunnel they were in was dark, and the lightstone he had dropped on the ground before throwing a rock at those two did not give off as much light as he had hoped.

Max grunted as he tried to stay hidden, but their tunnel seemed to have every inch covered in webs, including the floor. “Stealth won't work!” he yelled as a third spider descended on a thick thread of webbing from the tunnel's darkness behind the other two, its face full of eyes looking right at Max.

Fowl looked so small compared to the spiders that were coming toward him. Their eight legs clattered against the stone, and their hair looked more like spikes than something soft one might want to feel. Chelicerae as big as the dwarf’s head opened and closed, and a green liquid started to ooze from its mouth, covering the black fangs.

“Helping you first!” Max shouted as he moved back toward Fowl as the first two spiders closed in on him. One paused momentarily and shot out some web from its backside, streaming like liquid before splattering all over Fowl’s plate armor and starting to harden.

“I’m fine!” the dwarf said as he hefted up his shield and began to swing his hammer toward the spider that was almost upon him.

The spider didn’t even flinch as it bit down on Fowl’s shield and tried to wrench it free from the dwarf. His hammer slammed into the face, catching one of its eight eyes. The creature hissed and yanked back, almost pulling Fowl off his feet as it kept a grip on the dwarf’s shield.

Running to help, Max got there in time to swing his halberd at the first spider. He sliced through its carapace with ease, sending guts and innards falling to the floor.

It let out a horrible, ear-piercing screech, which hurt Max for a brief moment before his sonar skills were able to deal with it.

The second spider came at Max, realizing he was a bigger threat, and lunged forward with a speed that was not obvious from how it ran.

Spinning quickly, Max lifted his halberd and allowed the spider to impale itself onto the weapon.

It took the weapon deep into its abdomen, and its legs reached for Max as it tried to grab and bite him. A stream of white came from the spinnerets pointing at him, spraying Max in the face and covering his whole front with the liquid that quickly started to harden.

“I’ve got the third!” Fowl shouted, seeing his friend currently engaged.

Max didn’t respond, allowing his sonar skill to help him move his head away from the fangs snapping at him while keeping the legs from latching on to him.

Then, Max sensed behind him two more spiders descending on his friends from above.

“Tanila, look up!”

130 - Honest Words in a Dungeon

[130 - Honest Words in a Dungeon - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Tanila looked up and saw the shapes of two spiders dropping quickly toward them.

“Two!” she shouted while casting a spell.

Her ice spear began to form and took off, flying straight into the face of the spider above Batrire. The spider screeched as it fell twenty feet to the floor.

The second spider saw its ally go down, dropped to the floor under its own power, and lifted its abdomen, spraying Tanila with a web blast.

She conjured a wall of air a few feet from her, and the liquid hit it, splattering all over. Some still made it past, falling upon her and starting to harden.

The spider then turned to Batrire and hissed, shooting liquid webbing at her, dousing her from head to toe.

“Taunting!”

Max felt the aura and could sense every spider turn to focus on the dwarf. Even the one impaled on his weapon immediately turned its attention toward Fowl.

Using the opportunity, Max lifted his weapon high into the air and slammed the spider into the ground, slicing his weapon through it. The spider was cut in half, its legs wriggling repeatedly as everything inside it gushed onto the floor.

A fireball slammed into the one Tanila had already hit with an ice spear. The smell of burning filled the air, and a hissing screech filled their ears.

Fowl held off both remaining spiders as best as he could as they attacked from the front and behind. Thankfully, his armor was too thick for them to pierce when they bit down on him.

Frustrated, Max shifted his stance and made a full swing, driving the hammer side of his weapon down on the head of the spider behind Fowl.

Green ooze and other matter exploded everywhere from the force of his blow as he drove the spider's head right into the stone floor.

Another ice spear came from Tanila, this time bigger, having had time to grow. It pierced its head, causing it to roll over and die.

With only one spider left, Fowl landed two hits against the creature's eyes before Max joined him and killed it with a well-placed attack.

“I’m going to punch Tom in the mouth!” shouted Tanila as she pulled at the spider web all over her. “This isn’t my idea of fun.”

Fowl laughed as the web seemed to stick to his armor less than it did to the others. “I don’t know, that was pretty fun, I think.”

Max sighed and shook his head, ignoring his dwarven friend's attempt to goad Tanila into cursing again. He easily pulled the sticky spiderweb off of himself. His strength tore through it like Tom's had through Tanila's spell.

Looking down at the five spider corpses around them, Max tried to imagine how other groups would fight these things without someone like him.

“This tunnel is going to make things incredibly tough for a normal group,” he said, pointing into the darkness above them. “Those two that dropped down from above almost got Batrire.”

Their healer shuddered as she nodded, cutting off the webs sprayed on her from the spider that had gotten past Fowl. “I *really* hate spiders. Did I mention that already?”

“About twenty times in the last ten minutes, my love,” Fowl replied as he started to remove the massive fangs from the spider corpse near him.

“Well, it’s true!”

Tanila watched Max as he replayed the fight in his mind again. “What are you thinking?”

“Besides the fact that we almost lost Batrire if I hadn’t detected those two spiders?”

“Yes, besides that fact,” she said with a groan.

“You and Batrire need to pay less attention to Fowl and me. These things aren’t bad; the webbing is a pain, and I can’t sneak up on them since it's on the ground, so they feel the vibrations. You obviously can kill them easily,” Max said as he pointed at the still-smoking corpse. “That just means we must be smart and keep our eyes open. You’re technically five levels above them right now, but something tells me the deeper we go, the higher level they will get. That means eventually, they will get harder.”

“Ignore Fowl and stop healing him. I got it,” Batrire joked as she used a knife to cut herself free from the webbing she couldn’t just pull off. “I’m guessing the real problem isn’t for the tank but for everyone else.”

Max nodded, taking a deep breath and letting it out. “Tom was right. Clearing this dungeon at our levels isn’t about the actual fight; it’s learning how to fight against creatures that come from all directions. We also need to make sure to defend those who will die to a bite or two versus the tank, who can’t be damaged that easily.”

“It's about bloody time,” Fowl grunted as he finished collecting the third set of fangs. “I’m tired of always being the one who needs to get healed.”

Tanila sighed, knowing Max was right.

“I guess this means we need to go deeper into this awful place.”

Nodding, he smiled at Tanila. “Don’t worry. I’ll do my best to keep you free of any more webs.”

She grinned, and Batrire groaned. “I wish my man would say those words to me.”

Tanila turned red, and Max glared at Batrire, who started to laugh. “I didn’t say you *were* her man; I just wished *my* man would say those words. Anything else is on the two of you.”

Fowl chuckled and tapped his metal helmet.

“I’m ready if you all are. Just remember, my Taunt is down for a little bit.”

Having learned a little about the dungeon, the next fight went better, with only Batrire getting covered in webbing when another group of spiders attacked, just like the first group. Soon, Max and the others had figured out that two or three would always attack from behind. Max would have to leave Fowl to fight the first two or three, with Tanila assisting via spells, while he waited for whatever tried to ambush the back line.

Batrire shuddered as she shook her hands, allowing Max to pull the webbing off her. “This stuff makes me feel so gross. Why does it have to be spiders?”

“It’s always going to be something,” Max answered as he finished getting her free.

“Four from behind and three from the front. I’m not sure I can keep up the mana output needed for that long,” Tanila said as she sat on the ground. “Blind only does so much since they have so many eyes, combined with the webs on the floor they use to feel vibrations.”

“Ice prison worked,” Fowl said as he cut out a set of fangs. “Your ensnare spells were weird, though.”

Max nodded, chuckling slightly. “I guess getting all eight legs is a pretty large task.”

“The experience is kind of bad, though,” Batrire complained. “Even only sharing it three ways it seems awfully slow compared to the dungeon break.”

“I think we’re doing fine,” Max said. “We really need to at least beat the first floor, if not the second.”

Grunting in agreement, Fowl finished harvesting and storing all the fangs.

“At least we haven’t had to use–”

“Shut it!” snapped Batrire as she glared at Fowl. “Don’t you dare jinx us!”

“Bah, beer and sausage, woman! There ain’t no jinxing nothing. Either the gods will it, or they don’t.”

Leaning against her staff, Batrire shot daggers at Fowl with her eyes. “I guess the gods might want you to sleep on the floor for a week.”

“Fine…” Fowl replied, turning away from his upset healer. “Let’s just keep moving. Speaking of beer and sausage, I’m getting hungry.”

“On you!”

Max cursed under his breath at Tanila's warning. With his sonar, Max knew precisely who ‘*on you’* referred to, but no one else would.

Fowl was tanking the three spiders like a pro, slamming his shield, hammer, and even an elbow into them as they surrounded him. Realizing he didn’t have to worry about getting hurt, the dwarf was content to get yanked in three different directions simultaneously.

Max saw the spider lunging for him, apparently angry about the axe he had tossed at one in the air. Its ally had fallen, landing on the axe and driving the massive blade deeper. He was sad there had only been two axe-wielding ogres in the entire section of the dungeon break he had looted; their axes were amazing.

“I got it!” Max replied as he planted his feet and swung his weapon downward at the lunging spider, slicing it like a hot knife through butter. The spider fell apart mid-air as its intestines and green goo splashed all over him.

Gagging as some got in his mouth, Max was thankful he had closed his eyes in time.

Don’t shout while killing something…

A stone wall slammed into a spider's face as it lunged for Batrire, and Max was on it before it decided which way to go.

His weapon tore through its back, filling the tunnel with the sound of a wet crunch and screeching as the hammer part of his weapon smashed through it.

Tanila breathed hard as Max smiled at her. “Nice work!”

She rolled her eyes and gave him a grin. “Says the warrior who could probably solo this dungeon. I’m almost out of mana after that fight. Eight of them isn’t a joke.”

“True, but you were amazing. Those ice spears and fireballs were–”

“Seth,” Fowl said loudly, interrupting Max’s praise of Tanila. “Seriously… we’re friends, right?”

Max tilted his head quizzically and looked at Fowl.

“Seriously. Just ask her out already. You don’t got to–”

The ringing of wood on a metal helmet rang out, and Max couldn’t help but smile as Batrire lowered her staff that had just bonked Fowl in the helmet.

“Hey! Why did you–”

“Shut it!” Batrire said, her face leaving no doubt of how serious she was.

“But–”

“I swear to Ockrim that if you don’t, I’ll personally stick my foot so far up your arse you’ll taste the goo from all these spiders I’ve stepped in.”

Fowl didn’t say another word, and Batrire nodded her head sharply.

Max glanced at Tanila, who was looking everywhere but at him.

“Maybe we should call it a day,” Max said slowly. “I think we could all use a break.”

“That would be good,” Fowl answered, his voice a little gruff through his helmet.

“Alright. Let’s finish harvesting these fangs, and then we can head back.”

Max walked next to Tanila as Fowl and Batrire had gone a little ahead. The lightstone gave off a glow from where the two dwarfs were.

“Tanila?” Max finally said, able to hear how fast her heart was beating.

“Yes?”

He wanted to sigh, scream, and shout. Inside him, he fought a battle against whatever his skill was, yet at this moment, that seemed like no big deal compared to telling Tanila how he felt.

“I’m not the best with words, but I think Fowl was right.”

He sensed her looking at him, so Max turned, looking up slightly at the taller elven mage. He could feel her whole body trembling slightly. She was just as afraid as he was.

“What exactly was he right about?” she asked, her voice slightly strained but still very steady compared to how he felt his was.

Groaning, Max smiled when he saw a smirk appear on her face. “You're not going to make it easy, are you?”

She said nothing, yet she never took her eyes off his.

“I hope you realize I have feelings for you; I’m just unsure how to deal with them.”

“Feelings? What kind of feelings?” Tanila asked, her face a little flushed but her voice steady and strong. He could see her eyes widen slightly and sense her pulse rate matching his.

Max took a deep breath and went for it.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her to a stop. Looking up at her, he smiled softly.

“I like you, and I care deeply for you. I can’t say I’m the best when it comes to talking bout how I feel because I’m not certain–”

Max found the words had stopped coming out of his mouth as a pair of lips suddenly were pressed against his.

He ignored the sound of someone hollering ahead in the tunnel since it wasn’t a cry for help. Instead, he reached out and drew Tanila close, ignoring the fact that they were standing in a dungeon covered in spider guts and pieces of web.

All he could think about was how he felt in that moment.

131 - Sharing The Truth

Max wasn’t sure how long the kiss had lasted, but both took a deep breath after their lips finally parted.

The lightstone Tanila had been carrying had dropped to the floor, and they stood there, still in an embrace.

Max could feel her breath against his face, and he smiled, not letting her pull back as she had initially started to.

“I’m guessing you like me too,” Max whispered and smiled as he heard Tanila groan as she shook her head slightly.

“And here I thought you were one of the smarter men in town,” she teased as she smiled back. “Now what?”

Max shrugged and kissed her briefly once more before pulling back, seeing her still leaning forward as if wanting him to continue. “Now, we get out of this dungeon and get cleaned up. After that, we can figure it out. I’m happy to know we are both on the same page.”

Grinning, Tanila nodded as Max took a step back and picked up the stone she had dropped. During that moment, though, he found her right hand with his and didn’t let go.

“You four seem to be in good spirits,” Alexander said as he set their food and drinks on the table. “Do you have anything to report?”
Everyone glanced at each other. Fowl had the biggest and stupidest grin yet said nothing.

“Nope, nothing to report but a good day in a dungeon,” Max replied.

“I'm glad to hear it. Also, I appreciate you all and how you trusted me after that… incident. It means a lot to me that you didn’t go spreading rumors or leaving after it.”

Max nodded and smiled. “You’re our inn. We aren’t planning on leaving and looking elsewhere. Besides, I don’t think anyone could have prevented what happened. I’m glad you stopped being uptight and finally let us pay you again.”

“Not me,” groaned Fowl as he winked at Alexander. “I mean, who doesn’t like free room and board?”

“The innkeeper,” Batrire replied as she gently elbowed Fowl.

Laughing, Alexander shrugged and gave Fowl a squeeze on the shoulder. “I’m content you are all safe and willing to eat in the common room again. Rumors were swirling I was hosting royalty or something because I wouldn’t let anyone in here.”

Max laughed and nodded. “I could see that.”

“So… what’s the plan?” Fowl asked after Alexander had walked away.

“About what?” Max replied as he reached for some fruit.

An elbow from Batrire caused Fowl to stop smiling, and the dwarf sighed. “About tomorrow. Are we going back?”

“I think we should,” Tanila answered. “At least until we can make it to the boss without any issues. After that, we can plan on doing one of the other dungeons.”

“But we aren’t going to kill the boss?” Fowl asked after grabbing two pieces of meat and some bread. “Why pass up on loot?”

“I’d rather check with Tom before we clear it in case he wants us to try something different. From what I read, the boss fight can sometimes be a pain in the rear.”

Stuffing his mouth, Fowl nodded and said nothing, content to focus on the food and drink before him.

Batrire smiled as she watched Tanila and Max sitting closer to each other than usual.

Tanila shook her head a few times and mouthed the word, *stop*.

Smirking, Batrire nodded and held up her right hand, gesturing toward Tanila, who said nothing. She ate slowly using a fork in her left hand.

Max sat in the oversized chair in the room they were now renting from Alexander, holding Tanila gently as she lounged against him.

“I never thought I would date a taller woman,” Max teased as he ran his hand up and down her back.

“You mean an elf?” she replied, her eyes closed and a smile permanently stuck to her face as she lay against him.

“That too, though I must say I did luck out. I must have picked up a skill that charms the most attractive elf in all the kingdoms.”

Groaning, Tanila tilted her head back and rolled her eyes after making sure he was looking at her.

She watched him smile, and a pain inside her told her it was time.

“What’s wrong?” Max asked. “I can see it written all over your face.”

She nodded. “We need to talk.”

His head went back a little bit and then cocked to the side as he watched her free herself from his embrace so that she could sit upright on the chair.

“That doesn’t sound good. Did I do something wrong already?”

She laughed softly and shook her head, smiling at his question.

“No… it’s not that. It’s time I told you something only Batrire and Fowl know- something about me.”

Max leaned forward and reached for her hand, smiling when she put hers on his. “No matter what you say, it won’t change how I feel.”

Tanila began to chuckle and then started to shake; she was laughing so hard. Max watched and, after a moment, realized that a few tears were falling. She reached over and wiped them away with her thumb.

“What am I missing?”

Sniffing and then sighing, Tanila shook her head, and everything about her changed in a moment. Max could see her posture becoming rigid, and her face took on an expression he could only remember seeing a few times. She turned on him and stared into his brown eyes.

“Max…”

He reacted to his real name, and Max knew something big must be coming if she used it.

“Your real name is Max Hoste. You are a young man given a black skill who has somehow defied the odds in not giving in to the power that tries to corrupt you. You have protected me and my only two friends and risked your life multiple times for mine. For that, I cannot hide anything from you anymore because you have hidden nothing from me.”

Lifting up her sleeve, Max watched Tanila wave her hand over her wrist, and a small bracelet appeared. On it was an intricate pattern of runes and writing, all weaving around what looked to be leaves and branches. The metal was white and looked like nothing he had ever seen before.

Tanila smiled at him and lifted her wrist till it was between their faces.

She slid the bracelet off. It expanded slightly as it went over her wrist until she held it in her hand.

Before his eyes, Max saw her hair start to change color. It became the color of fine gold, and then her eyes changed, too. They turned a yellow pigment that matched

her hair. Her face almost appeared to be glowing, and when she chuckled, Max realized his mouth was open.

“You’re even more beautiful. Why hide this? Who are–”

The words stopped in his mouth as he realized now what his mind was trying to tell him.

“You’re royalty.”

It wasn’t a question but a statement. Max knew at that moment he was right. Though utterly tiny, her reaction wasn’t what had told him he was right. It was her heart. Once he said what she really was, the pace settled down, and now, no longer hiding who she was, knowing that Max knew the truth, she was at peace.

“Why? How? I mean… why?”

She smiled and reached over, putting her hand against his cheek.

“Does it matter if I am royalty?”

“To me? No! To your parents… wait… are your parents…”

Tanila nodded. “Yes. My parents are the king and queen. I am the third daughter, and some might call me… a black sheep, as you humans would say. Choosing to make my own path with my skills did not–”

“Skills?” Max asked, his eyes widening some.

“Yes… I have more than the elemental mastery. I have another one that only a handful of people know about. It is a red skill…”

Max forced himself to not react. Inside him, a hunger came from his skill, a craving to reach out and end her and possibly make whatever she had his.

“That’s… that’s how you know so much about the skills.”

She sighed and nodded. “I know more than I have let on, and I am sorry. There was so much I wanted to share, but trusting you with that and my heart was… hard. I didn’t think it would be possible to… have feelings for someone like you.”

Max chuckled. “A human.”

She sighed and nodded. “Yes… my parents would be even more upset if they knew, but as you can probably guess, I rarely concern myself with that.”

“Perhaps one day I can meet them and prove myself worthy of you,” Max replied, giving a fake bow as he did.

“Please, you don’t want to meet them. I don’t want to be around them. They try to control everything, and with their skills… well, let’s not go there.”

Max nodded and reached out, grabbing her hands and holding them. “Where you come from doesn’t bother me. I like the Tanila I’ve seen covered in spiders and other monster guts. I won’t lie, your hair like this and those eyes are pretty amazing, but I don’t need that. I just need what’s inside here.” Max tapped his chest and watched as that well protected shell of Tanila cracked.

She sniffed and smiled, blinking her eyes for a moment.

“Let me put this back on,” Tanila said as she freed her hands and slid the bracelet back over her hand. It shrunk, and after she waved her hand over it, the runes glowed before the whole thing disappeared, and her hair changed color.

Max smiled as he saw her hair turn brown and her eyes go green.

“Uh…”

She laughed and shrugged. “I can do that with this. Maybe I’ll keep changing things up to make life exciting.”

Rolling his eyes, Max grabbed her hands and pulled her close, kissing her for a moment.

She sighed and smiled as they pulled back.

“Okay, stop that, I need to finish.”

Laughing, Max nodded and leaned back, giving her space.

Pulling her braid over her shoulder, Tanila took a moment to gather herself and then looked Max in the eyes.

“As I already mentioned, I have a red skill. I won’t use it unless I have to because of its function.”

Max’s eyebrows raised, and yet he said nothing.

“You remember the vampire rabbit and the shade?”

“How could I forget? Nothing like almost dying.”

Tanila nodded. “I have something similar to theirs. Something like what the boy you killed in the arena had.”

Max felt his skin tingle with energy, and the hairs on his arms began to rise.

“Does every royal family member have red skills?” Max asked, a lump beginning to form in his throat.

Tanila nodded.

“Every royal family member is born with one. My siblings all have some, and they can be… terrible.”

Her face scrunched, and Max could see she wasn’t excited about this.

“You don’t have to tell me yours,” he said, reaching over and grabbing her one free hand.

She smiled and slowly shook her head.

“I don’t, but I want to. You need to know what you’re getting involved with. My skill is built around my elemental mastery and anything else I cast. If I activate it…” Tanila

paused and took a deep breath, letting it out as she squeezed Max's hand. "I start to drain the intelligence and wisdom of those around me."

A cold snap rushed through Max's body from head to toe.

She has a child of mine…

Tanila saw Max's reaction and peered intently at him.

"Are you ok?"

Max nodded slowly and then stopped. Shaking his head, he grimaced. "My skill just said your skill is a child of it."

Tanila unintentionally pulled her hand from Max's and stared at him. "Does it know the name of my skill?" she asked, her voice having lost its steady tone.

Max waited, unsure if it would respond on its own.

Do you know the name of her skill?

Laughter came from inside his head, and Max winced.

The Flayer Aura is powerful, especially in the hands of one willing to use it.

Swallowing a few times after hearing the voice, Max nodded.

"The Flayer Aura?"

Tanila immediately backed away from Max, covering her mouth with her hands.

"It's true," she whispered.

Free Signed Copy of Dragon Rider Chance!

Free Signed Copy of Dragon Rider Chance! - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/72446/dawn-of-the-last-dragon-rider-litrpg

It's hard to believe that the day finally arrived when I was able to hold my own copy of the first book!

Saturday, this beautiful thing came in!!

So! I'm going to have a giveaway! Post a comment on the chapter in my Dragon Rider Series (It dropped at 8:10 today) (it can be anything—from congrats to hairy dwarf balls to favorite recipe—I don't care), and on Wednesday, I'll do a drawing and send the winner a free copy, signed by me! If you live somewhere that it's about $100+ to ship, I'll just get with you and Paypal cash so you can purchase a copy in May!

Check for the newest Chapter here for where to reply
- https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/72446/dawn-of-the-last-dragon-rider-litrpg

I am super grateful for everyone who has stayed with me through this point in the story and read UL1 as well! I'm two chapters away from finishing the audiobook, and it's been so surreal!

Just know if you're ever where I'm at, I'll gladly sign any of the work I've done!

The good news is - UL1 Paperbacks should be out this week if all goes well on Amazon!

Stay tuned for another give away soon!

132 - Making Plans

[132 - Making Plans - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“What’s true?” Max asked as he stood up and tried to move toward Tanila.

She backed away again, holding her hand up and trying to get Max to stop.

“Wait! Please! I need a moment!”

Confused and frustrated, Max nodded and took a few steps back, standing by the chair they had been sharing a moment ago.

He could see Tanila’s eyes as she looked at the floor. They were darting back and forth, obviously working through something in her mind.

Max wanted to know what was so bad and what would make her move like that? His mind tried to solve the problem.

It’s because of you! She is afraid of you!

Nothing came from his thoughts, but Max knew he was right. It had to be his skill and how it actually communicated that made Tanila afraid.

“What is it about my black skill? Is it alive?”

Tanila looked up and chewed on her lips. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him. Eventually, she shrugged. “No one knows… there are stories, rumors, and legends, but they are so few. I didn’t believe them. I couldn’t let myself believe it at first when you told me. If you really had the skill you said you had, then there would be no way you could control it!” she exclaimed. “A red skill is hard enough to resist! There is a reason why I choose not to use mine. Every time I do, I want to use it more. It is like…” Tanila reached up and touched her lips with her fingertips. “It feels like our first kiss. I want to stay there, doing that forever, but I know I can’t.”

Max fought off the smile he wanted to give, knowing that he agreed with her on everything.

“I understand what you are saying,” he replied quietly. “There are moments when all I want to do is consume everything and everyone.”

Slowly, he moved closer to Tanila, approaching her like she was a timid animal. When he was close, he reached out with his hand, holding it palm up.

She looked at him and his hand, and after taking a breath, she put her hand on his.

“I don’t give in,” Max said, rubbing his thumb against her skin. “I don’t give in because if I do, I might hurt you or lose you forever, and… I can’t imagine that. That

was why I let it take control that day we were surrounded. We struck a bargain. You wouldn’t get hurt.”

Her eyes began to get moist, and using her other hand, Tanila wiped them as she blinked.

They stood there briefly, each rubbing the other’s hand while saying nothing.

“Go ahead and turn in,” Max said as he moved close to her. Kissing her on the cheek, he smiled. “I’ll be here in the morning. The same guy who liked you before he knew you were a runaway princess.”

Tanila chuckled and sniffed as she nodded, allowing herself to smile.

“Thank you, Ma… Seth. Thank you for understanding.”

He nodded and watched as she turned, went to her room, and shut the door behind her.

Frustrated, Max stared at her door. One moment, he was on top of the world; the next, he was angry because something he couldn’t control might keep him away from Tanila.

We need to have a talk!

Quietly, Max went out the door to their suite and locked it behind him. He needed to think, and there was one way to do it that really worked.

Grunting, Max parried the club and deflected it to the side as the troll attacked him. Its spiked club slammed into the water, and Max turned, bringing his halberd around and slicing the creature's thick skin.

The blade cut through and struck the bone, leaving a massive gash that sizzled from the fire enchantment on his weapon.

Roaring, the troll swung its club backhanded at Max, who easily dodged under it. Max attacked the same spot with a precision that most wouldn’t have at this level.

Two strikes later, the leg and its former owner were on the ground in the putrid water.

[2 Strength Consumed]

[2 Constitution Consumed]

Another troll was soon located, and the minute of fighting Max needed to kill it looked like a work of art by a skilled artist. Every strike, blow, and swing of his weapon hit where he intended, and then, with one last attack, the troll’s head was liberated from its neck.

[2 Strength Consumed]

[2 Constitution Consumed]

Not even panting, Max stared at the creature before him. He should have harvested it, but he didn’t feel like it.

“Are you ever going to reply?!” he shouted, storing his weapon while grabbing the troll’s club and putting it in storage.

Nothing came, as with all the other times he had shouted and yelled. No reply to alleviate his frustration.

It was late, and he needed to get back and rest if he was going to be useful tomorrow, but he still had an uneasy feeling in his stomach. Tanila knew something, but she was too afraid to share it.

“How was last night?” Fowl asked as they sat down for breakfast.

Batrire had failed to elbow him before he asked his question, and as Fowl scowled at her, Max and Tanila looked at each other and smiled.

“We’re figuring things out,” Max replied. “Surely you and Batrire did the same.”

Fowl started to laugh and shake his head until he saw Batrire holding a fist near his face. Quieting quickly, Fowl held up both hands before her as he leaned away from his love.

“I… I’ll not answer that question due to the fact I’m not wearing my armor at the moment,” Fowl sputtered as he blocked a punch from Batrire.

“You better shut yer trap, or I’ll be getting me my own room somewhere else,” Batrire replied.

Max shuddered at her tone and couldn’t believe that Fowl wasn’t fased by it.

“They're always like this,” Tanila whispered as the two jabbed and sparred in their side of the booth.

“Well, hopefully, one day, Fowl will grow up,” Max stated as he grabbed a roll.

Fowl chuckled and shook his head. “I’m too young to grow up. Of course, that sounds funny coming from you without a lick of hair on your head.”

Max smiled and rubbed his bald head. “I’d say something, but for some reason, I’m afraid it would just get you smacked by Batrire.”

Batrire nodded and chuckled. “Shut up and eat. We got a dungeon full of spiders to deal with.”

The first floor was the cakewalk Max had hoped for. Everyone reacted precisely as they should, resulting in spiders dying faster and fewer webs being sprayed on everyone.

“This is what I get for jinxing us, isn’t it?” Fowl grumbled as the four stared at the portal for the second floor. The purple color vibrated slightly, telling them that fate or some god had once again thrust a choice before them.

“Anything but poison or spiders, and I would rush right in,” Batrire said as she tapped her fingers against her staff. “Why does it have to be here?”

Tanila laughed, her soft voice sounding sweeter than Max could remember. “I have never heard of a group getting this many opportunities. The odds of it are impossible.”

“Which begs the question, why?” Max asked. “Besides the obvious that somewhere is a god or gods that love or hate me, but why? Is the risk really worth it?”

“Yes!” Fowl exclaimed. “The experience and loot are always worth it. We know that any other party would give their testicles to get a portal like this!”

The other three grumbled, each of them knowing Fowl was right.

“Why do we always debate this?” Max asked as he moved toward the portal. “We all know Fowl will guilt us into going inside.”

Fowl blew a raspberry and started laughing at its sound in his helmet.

“Warriors first,” Batrire said.

“Every time,” Max replied as he stepped into the portal.

“Holy elf tits,” Max muttered as his eyes focused on the dungeon floor.

The cave was gone, and now, all around Max was a towering forest that sent a shiver down his spine. Dead-looking trees swayed in the wind, making noise as branches rubbed against each other. Spiderwebs were everywhere in the forest, hanging from trees, lining most of the dirt floor, and filling almost every open space where foliage would typically be. Most of the trees lowest branches started around twenty feet off the ground, and some were over forty feet up. The sky held a massive moon that cast its light in the clearing where they stood, surrounded by trees. Besides that small amount of light, the darkness was so thick inside the forest that one could feel it.

“Holy elf tits!” Fowl exclaimed, and Max nodded.

“Said the same thing,” Max replied.

“No portal either,” Fowl said. “Guess that means this level is going to be a pain in the arse.”

Tanila stumbled into Fowl’s backside and muttered, “Hairy dwarf balls.”

“That they are lass,” Fowl teased, trying to find a way to cut the tension.

Max moved forward a little bit, looking at the trees and their massive trunks and trying to see deeper into the darkness of the trees.

“We got what? Fifty yards around us with no trees, and then that?” Fowl asked as Max neared the edge. “What you thinking?”

Max’s mind was racing, and he tried to decide if the idea was plausible. Turning around, he walked back to where everyone was waiting and frowned. “Tanila, I have a question. Will trees in a dungeon forest burn?”

She made a face and then shrugged. “Maybe? We haven’t tried that, but the webs do burn, as you know from a few of the fights. Are you seriously considering what I think you're considering?”

Fowl glanced between the two. “Gods, Either you two tell me what you are thinking or, so help me, I’m going to put the next two levels of stat points into intelligence.”

Tanila and Max both laughed while Batrire groaned.

“I’m just wondering if we can light this forest on fire,” Max said as he pointed at the trees. “There are webs everywhere, and if they burn like the ones did back in the cave, we could possibly burn every web before we even go in.”

“And what if that aggros every spider inside the damn dungeon?” Fowl asked.

“You should be okay for a while. None of the other spiders could bite through your armor.” Max replied.

Groaning, Fowl shook his head and looked at Batrire for support but saw her studying the forest and stroking her beard.

“Bah, gods, woman, not you too?”

Shrugging, Batrire gave a slight frown. “Honestly, if I had to choose between entering that forest the way it is or trying something like this, I’m open to the fire choice.”
“And if we’re overrun by spiders?!” Fowl asked the tone in his voice leaving no doubt about his feelings for this plan.

“We’re in the open. They can’t drop down on us like they can in there. What do you want to do if we can’t see in there and half a dozen or more sneak up on us?”

Grunting in frustration, Fowl took off his helm and stared Max down. “Tell me you really think this is the best idea.”

Max nodded and began to pull weapons out of his storage. “I do. Now, help me set up some areas I want to mark off. I’m unsure how this will go down, but we must be ready to fight. "

Groaning again, Fowl followed Max as they moved to do whatever Max had in mind.

“You really think this is a good idea?” Batrire whispered to Tanila as they stood in the middle of the clearing.

“Sadly, yes. The only other option is going in there, and everything I know tells me Seth is right. Going in there is far worse than bringing the fight out here.”

133 - Fires and Spiders Oh My

133 - Fires and Spiders Oh My - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

Fowl watched as Max took out the ogre axes and swords and then drove it before driving it into the ground in a circle around them. Two swords followed by two axes, then eight clubs with massive spikes.

“Trolls… you went and fought trolls?”

Max shrugged before driving the last one into the ground. “I couldn’t sleep. Needed to clear my head.”

“Guy goes and solos a level forty-five dungeon to clear his head,” muttered Fowl as he raised his hands. “Ockrim, I thought you liked me. Why can’t I solo that crap?”

Max chuckled as he double-checked the last club and moved to where Tanila and Batrire were waiting.

“So what’s the plan, oh fearless leader?” Batrire asked, smiling so much that Max knew it was meant to bother Fowl.

“We stand here and fight if the damn forest actually catches on fire,” Max said as he drew an ‘*x*’ on the ground. “Tanila and I will try to light a fire in the section where the swords are. If it spreads, that will be the first area to provide us with opponents. If nothing happens, we can try once more, but if the fire doesn’t spread after two tries, we will have to pick a path and start venturing in.”

“How are you going to light that forest on fire?” Fowl asked. “Just aim for a tree?”

Hefting his halberd in his hand, Max smiled. “Actually, I’m about to make some logs and tinder to help.”

Max began swinging his weapon, and the forest reacted when the axe slammed into the trunk of the tree he had picked.

Screeches echoed from inside, but nothing appeared that he or the others could see.

Setting up again, Max chopped out massive sections of the tree until it fell over, crashing into the ground and causing another burst of noise to rise up from the shadows of the forest.

“That went better than I expected,” Fowl stated, earning groans from the others.

“Please stop,” Batrire growled.

Max got to work, cutting through the webs connected to the tree, then hacking off limbs and branches and tossing them to Fowl.

It took over an hour, but before all was said and done, a large pile of wood taller than Max was stacked around a tree a little further into the forest.

“This feels like a dumb move, but I still like it better than the alternative,” Max stated.

Tanila nodded and raised her hand as Max mimicked her.

Grinning, Max shouted, “Let’s see if together we can catch this damn place on fire!”

Chuckling, Max grinned and said a silent prayer to whoever might be listening.

This is your damn fault. Help us to beat it…

Channeling magic he created a fireball and poured more mana into it, letting it get bigger and bigger as Tanila did the same.

She grunted and Max sent his fireball at the pile of logs, watching the ball of flame explode on the stack. Some were flung away by the force, yet they were burning as they landed on webs, and the flames spread slowly.

Tanila let hers go, the fireball twice the size of Max’s. It roared as it flew, and more logs were blown away from the impact, scattering deeper into the forest.

A few shapes were almost visible, falling back from the flaming logs, but in seconds, the pile of wood was blazing, and fire spread along the strands of web, which soon moved up the tree trunk.

“One more?” Max asked.

“No, pull back. I think this should work.”

Together, they ran back to the center of the clearing, preparing for a response they hoped would not overwhelm or kill them all.

It had taken over half an hour for their initial fire to spread, but soon, a red glow filled the floor as the forest began to burn. Smoke billowed into the night sky, and even though they knew it wasn’t a real place, Max wondered if the smoke might eventually fill everything and choke them to death.

“Those flames are really moving now,” Fowl muttered as he watched a tree crash to the ground, sending an explosion of fire and sparks.

Shrieks were coming from the forest, and Max was trying to see if anything was approaching the open area.

“Did anyone else notice a slight gain in experience?”

Max looked at Batrire, who smirking after speaking.

“Seriously?”

The dwarf nodded and shrugged. “There is Nothing else for me to do, and there is plenty of time before I refresh the buff that I give you. So I’ve been watching, and I think it's gone up twice. Nothing huge, mind you, but still.”

Shaking his head, Max turned his attention back toward the fire, which was spreading in all directions. As far as Max could see, an entire section of the forest was engulfed.

Crashing sounds came a minute later, and Max noticed movement near the treeline.

“We got incoming!” he shouted, moving to the line he had created with weapons.

“Aye, I see 'em,” Fowl said as he fastened his helmet tighter. “Do you think they’ll actually fight?”

Another tree fell over near the section where they had seen movement, and three massive spiders, each ten feet tall, came skittering out from the woods.

Their eyes locked onto the group, and they made chittering noises before rushing toward them.

“That looks bad!” Fowl shouted. “Those can probably bite through my armor!”

Max knew Fowl was right, but he said nothing. Instead, he activated Stealth and disappeared from sight.

“No webs,” he whispered and moved slightly to the side of Fowl. “Throw a stone or something.”

Max smiled as he saw Fowl pluck a stone from his storage and throw it at the spiders racing toward them. The rock bounced harmlessly off the one he hit, but it did its job by angering the creature.

These spiders were solid black with a massive red line running from their mouth to the tips of their backs. The hair he could see now on their legs glistened with something that looked wet, and a red liquid dripped from their fangs as they ran. Five eyes were clustered next to each other on their faces, each the size of Fowl’s helmet.

Max readied himself and moved slowly toward them, wondering if they could see through stealth.

As the three raced toward Fowl, none of them appeared to react to his presence.

Grateful for this, Max got in the front of the right one and waited.

They raced toward Fowl, their thick legs punching small holes in the ground as they propelled themselves forward.

Setting his feet, Max took a deep breath and swung his halberd at the creature’s face.

The blade hit the spider’s exoskeleton, and it cracked, his blade sliding through the spider’s mouth and traveling four feet through its body before coming to a stop.

Having remembered to keep his mouth closed this time, Max endured the spattering of gore and goo that sprayed onto him as the spider’s body came to a sudden stop.

The one nearest to him hadn’t been hit by Fowl’s rock and immediately turned, making a weird screeching noise as it came at Max.

Max leaped back, yanking his weapon free.

Two legs came at him, one from each side, as the spider that decided Max should be lunch lunged forward. His sonar helped him dodge, and Max could tell he was still faster than these creatures, but not by much.

Parrying the first leg, Max ducked under the second one, turning and preparing to strike with his weapon when his sonar picked up a rush of liquid coming toward him. It was too close and too fast. Choosing to make a trade, he ducked under the spider's

body, turning his back to the incoming liquid, and thrust his weapon upward into the mouth coming toward him.

The tip of his halberd went through the open mouth and into the head of the spider, piercing the soft inside and driving all the way to the brain.

As much as Max wanted to celebrate his sudden kill, the pain from the liquid that washed over him took his breath away.

Everywhere the liquid hit, it burned and felt like his skin was on fire.

He wanted to scream, but the liquid was spraying all around him, and the last thing he wanted to endure was a nose or mouthful of that.

The spider jerked momentarily, its body spasming as Max stood there in pain.

[Regeneration]

His body immediately began to feel better, but his health continued to go down.

Crap... I timed the kill wrong...

Running forward, Max let the spider fall to the ground behind him, taking a quick, small breath as he got clear of the corpse and the spray of liquid.

He turned and saw that Fowl’s shield and feet were also covered in the liquid web, and as Max moved, he felt the liquid web covering him tightening up/hardening.

“It’s poison! Like acid!” Max shouted as he moved toward the last spider.

“I know!” came a pained shout from Fowl. “Smells like arse too!”

Trying not to laugh, Max moved behind the spider and hacked at the joints where the four legs were attached to the body.

Having attacked from behind, the spider never saw the weapon that cleaved off three of its legs, causing it to tumble to the side.

As it fell to the ground, Max unleashed a combo attack that ended with the second strike slicing off the top half of the spider's head.

“Gods, it burns!” Fowl groaned. “Help me with this stuff on my shield.”

Max nodded and put his weapon away, grabbing the webs that had hardened and almost locked Fowl’s shield in place against the ground.

“Those are pretty nasty,” Tanila said as she moved closer. “I can burn off those webs if you want.”

Shaking his head, Max looked her in the eyes and smiled. “I’ve been burnt alive once. I’d prefer not to do that again if possible.”

Talina nodded, and Max saw a smirk as she moved back to where Batrire waited.

[Regeneration Expired]

Cracking his neck, Max realized he was full health, and the slight pain he still felt was mostly the web inside his chain armor.

“Batrire?”

“I’m waiting to see how long that goes on for,” she replied, knowing what Max was wondering. “It’s not a true poison. I already tried to cure that. It’s, like you said, an acid attack.”

“The burning is almost gone,” Fowl groaned as he stored his shield and used his weapon to scrape the webs off his plated boots. “It only got through the joints, but where it found skin was not fun.”

A crashing sound from the trees caught their attention, and Max spun around, looking for its source.

“It was in the fire. Those trees are all almost burnt down,” Tanila pointed out. “You can see further into the woods now.”

“And my experience bar is still going up,” Batrire added. “So something is dying.”

The trees to the right of the fire made sounds of shrieking and clattering, and Max groaned as he saw more shapes emerging from the woods that were not yet in flames.

“Holy elf tits,” Fowl cursed. “There’s, like, six of them with that thing.”

Max nodded and glanced back at Tanila and Batrire. Both looked to be concerned at the sight before them.

“Should we Focus on the larger one first?” Max asked as he turned to face the pack of spiders now heading their way.

“It’s all yours,” Fowl said as he pulled his shield back out. “We’ll need whatever god loves you to help us with this pack.”

Surprised by that statement, Max glanced at his dwarven friend but understood why he said it.

Things were about to get nasty.

134 - Why I Hate Spiders

[134 - Why I Hate Spiders - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“Ideas?” Max asked as he watched the spiders forming at the edge of the woods.

“That big one has to be the floor boss or a rare spawn,” Tanila replied. “Maybe like that…”

She didn’t finish, but everyone glanced at Batrire, who was scowling at them.

“I’m fine, ya bastards!” she cursed. “Focus on that thing.”

Six spiders, all like the three they had fought earlier, were guarding a spider that had to be at least fifteen feet tall. The spider was white everywhere except the massive red lines that ran down the center of both the top and bottom of its body.

“I got a horrible idea, but maybe it can even up the odds from the start.”

“Yer not going to use that skill, are ya?”

Max shook his head. “I’m going to use Haste and Stealth. I think I can get behind it and then backstab it. I’d guess it's going to have some way to see me if I stay over here and –”

Max stopped talking as the group of seven began to move toward them. Six black spiders all flanked the white one, creating a bubble of protection.

“Ogre nuts!” Max cursed as he activated Stealth. “Be ready!”

Max vanished and took off to the right, moving faster while Stealthed than running.

“I’ll blow everything I got!” Tanila shouted as he took off running.

“Damn idiot,” Fowl grumbled, “always trying to show off.”

Skirting around the spiders, Max stayed as far away as possible, making his way toward the white one's rear. They weren’t running or charging at his friends like the others, which scared him.

I hope this thing doesn’t spew venom like that scorpion.

As he approached the boss, preparing to come up behind it, the six black spiders moved quickly to different spots, and the white spider vanished.

Crap! It can stealth!

Forging ahead to where the boss had just been, Max tried to sense where it was with Sonar. Time was running out on his Haste and Stealth. If that spider got the drop on them, people would die.

Glancing at the six spiders' positions, Max noticed a large space between them as they made their way toward his group. Going as fast as Stealth would allow him to, with the Haste ability active, Max saw the timer counting down from ten seconds.

At seven, his sonar picked up the shape he was hoping for. At the edge of his ability to sense was the white spider crouching and moving toward Fowl.

With no time left to waste, Max went in for an attack.

[Power Strike]

Coming out of stealth, Max’s halberd ripped through the air as he planted his feet just under the boss's backside, which was taller than him even while crouched. His halberd moved in a chopping motion, and the green glow surrounding the blade ripped through the bottom of the spider’s abdomen, his weapon sliced from spinneret

to mid-section bringing the white spider out of stealth. It shrieked and tried to jump away, but its body caved in on itself partially, reducing its ability to move.

The back half of its body fell on Max, covering him in gore as the exoskeleton enveloped him.

Its shriek caused the other spiders to turn and race toward their fallen leader.

Holy…

Unable to finish his thought, Max started hacking from inside the creature's body, trying to get out of it so he could breathe. His halberd jabbed repeatedly, but his position, combined with the body pressing down on him, made it difficult.

Desperately wanting to breathe, Max started casting his area of effect fire spell. His weapon poked through the top of the creature's abdomen, and his fire spell erupted as he prepared to try to cut through it more.

Max recalled how his spell had reacted when he cast it inside the skeleton.

The difference was now extremely noticeable, as the back half of the spider's body exploded, flames rushing out all around him. Since the last time he had used this spell, he had gained over thirty points in intelligence, more than doubling it.

The spider roared in agony as flames covered its front half while its back half was vaporized almost completely.

The three black spiders that had gotten close were also caught in the blast. Flames covered their legs and bodies, burning their skin.

Gasping for air, Max saw the white spider struggling to move. With only a small portion of its front section left, the two attached legs seemed unable to move. Its massive fangs opened and closed but could not reach him.

Taking his weapon, Max drove the tip into the spider’s head above its eyes and heard it scream.

It stopped shuddering, and a cool shock hit his system.

[2 Dexterity consumed]

Smiling, Max turned, his eyes locked onto one of the guards that was flittering about, flames still covering its torso and head.

“Time to die, you eight-legged freak!” Max shouted.

“How do I get stuck harvesting this stuff?” Fowl asked, groaning as he waited for Max to finish hacking the fangs off of the white spider.

“You got plate armor, Mr. *I can’t be bit*,” teased Batrire. “Time to show us how special you are.”

Fowl groaned as Tanila stood next to Max.

“You look tired,” Max said. “Finally decided to show your real strength?”

“I didn’t have a choice once all six of them went after you. Again, casting that spell when surrounded by spiders is a good way to get in trouble.”

Max laughed and then slammed his weapon down, severing the last fang from what remained of the white spider's body.

“As I mentioned before, having a twenty-five or so intelligence versus almost sixty created a bit of difference in power.”

Batrire groaned, and Tanila smirked.

“Yeah, he loves to flaunt the stat, doesn’t he?” Batrire asked.

“Imagine what he would do with an intelligence stat like mine,” Tanila teased. “Oh look, I’m the mighty warrior with a hundred intelligence.”

Max turned and cocked his head sideways at Tanila.

“Your intelligence is one hundred?”

Her cheeks reddened, and Batrire started to laugh.

“Hah, serves ya right,” Fowl declared. “Teasing us boys and sharing yer stats.”

“Uh… yeah, with items, I’m a little over a hundred,” Tanila admitted.

“Quiet ya two,” Batrire interrupted.

More noises came from the woods, and Max spun to stare in the direction Batrire was pointing.

“Do you feel that?”

Max nodded, realizing what had gotten Batrire’s attention.

“The dirt is vibrating.”

“Arrrgggggg,” groaned Fowl. “Yer telling me something bigger than this white bastard is coming?”

Everyone faced the direction of the noise. They could see the trees swaying slightly, with a few crashing down. Something was making a path through the trees that were on fire, it appeared to be in a hurry and heading in their direction.

“We’ve bloody burned down a fourth or more of this forest, and now this?” Fowl continued.

“Power Strike is down, as is Haste,” Max said as he began to back away from the spider corpses surrounding them.

“A little less than fifty percent of my mana,” Tanila said.

“I’m good. None of ya all really got hurt, and Seth kept himself topped up by killing them.”

They all stepped back to where the circle of weapons was and kept an eye on the trees that were getting knocked over as something came at them.

“Gods, I don’t want to die,” Fowl muttered. “Is it too much to ask, Ockrim?”

“We don’t even know what it is.”

“Aye, my love, but it's big enough to shake the ground and knock down trees. I mean, look at the ground move!” Fowl exclaimed.

Max knew Fowl was right, and having used his Power Strike skill, the cooldown was going to hurt.

We may need to try to find a fifth member.

“What are the odds of taunt working on whatever this is?” Max asked as he saw a massive flaming shape approaching through the trees.

“Maybe five seconds? But I don’t want to do that. If I do–”

“No choice, use all your skills,” Max interrupted.

“Holy dwarf balls,” Tanila cursed, beating Fowl, who had started to open his mouth.

Stepping out of the trees was a twenty-two-foot spider that was currently on fire. Whatever color it had been was hard to determine because its entire body was consumed by the flames. It didn’t look to be in the greatest condition, yet one hit from its leg or the massive four-foot-long fangs would most likely kill any of them.

“Someone else wear plate,” Fowl muttered.

“Ok, it's injured and doesn’t look to be very fast. Fowl you tank and Tanila you–”

The massive spider’s eyes focused on them as Max spoke, and it glowed green.

One moment, it was at the edge of the trees, fifty yards away. The next, it had leaped into the air and was coming right at them.

“Run!” Max shouted when the spider leaped for them.

Max didn’t wait. He grabbed Tanila and put her over his shoulder as he ran as fast as he could from where the spider was going to land.

As it came crashing down, he leaped into the air, his mind guessing what would happen when the spider landed.

The ground erupted from the force of its impact, rock, and dirt vibrating, almost creating a miniature earthquake.

Being in the air prevented Max from falling, and when he landed he quickly dropped Tanila with no real grace and spun, preparing for the creature behind him.

Ten yards away was the spider, legs burning and its fangs locked on Fowl.

Behind Fowl, on the ground and struggling to get up, was Batrire. They had not gotten far enough away, and the impact had done its job.

Max knew Fowl had used his Armored Warrior skill.

“LIGHT IT UP!” Max shouted as he ran toward a flaming leg.

As Max moved, he cast his area of affect ice spell. Not sure how fast this thing was, he wanted any help he could get.

Reaching the creature, Max swung his weapon with everything he had. His arms vibrated from the blow so much they hurt, and the weapon stopped, not able to make more than a scratch on the heavily armored leg.

Stunned for a second, Max saw his ice spell go off and watched as an ice spear raced toward the spider’s eyes.

Spotting the spell with one of its five eyes, it raised a leg and blocked it.

A noise came from its mouth as the spider lifted Fowl off the ground with its fangs.

“Help!” Fowl shouted, his voice strained, as Max heard the sound of metal being crushed together.

“FOWL!” Batrire yelled, panic in her voice as she cast a heal while finally getting to her feet.

Max’s mind slowed down as the shouts and other sounds assaulted his ears. His friend was caught in a bite that would soon crush him, and getting him out of that wasn’t going to be possible if Max couldn’t even scratch the spider's leg.

Tanila’s spell hadn’t done a thing either.

It wasn’t full power, but even then…

Laughter filled his head as Max realized only one option was left, and it would play all of his trump cards.

Putting his hand against the spider, he used his new ability before casting his area of affect fire spell again.

[Festering Touch]

The spot his hand was on made an awful noise and smelled horrible, but Max didn’t wait. There was no time, and he had to act.

[Evasion]

[Berserker]

His vision shifted as he gazed at the leg before him, already drawing back his halberd.

It went red, but not as dark as it had always been before.

135 - The Power of Magic

[135 - The Power of Magic - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Max’s halberd tore through the spider's leg, hacking a four-foot-long section off. This caused the spider to stumble for a moment, and as the leg came down again, another section was cleaved off.

The spider let out a screech, freeing Fowl from the fangs that had him wedged between them.

The dwarven warrior fell twenty feet, crashing into the ground with a massive thud, but Max didn’t see that as the rage had him focused on one thing. Killing the damn twenty-two-foot spider.

The spider started to turn but couldn't put the leg missing an eight-foot section back down, and Max forced himself to override the rage. The skills upgrade allowed him to think momentarily, and he focused on the plastron above him.

Leaping from the ground, he shot at it like he had been fired from a catapult, blasting towards and then through it, holding his weapon out before him.

An ear-shattering shriek came from the spider as it was knocked upward, and Max found himself inside the creature's body, pressed in on from every side.

Time was ticking down on the berserker buff, and Max went to work. His strength was unstoppable for a few more seconds, and his blade tore through the creature, slicing its connecting ligaments and organs. The skill kept him from being overwhelmed by the darkness and smell, while his sonar skill kept him informed of his position.

With two seconds left, Max fought back the rage and forced himself to go upward, carving a hole in the top of the spider's body as it danced around. The spider's legs created massive holes and threatened the lives of his allies beneath it.

His vision returned to normal, and Max tried to take a deep breath of air, only to suck in the gore and ooze that was all around him. There was a hole above him where he had managed to puncture the top part of the spider’s carapace.

Gagging, Max stored his halberd and tried to swim through the creature's hacked-up innards. He finally made it to the outer shell, grasping it with both hands and wiggled his head out.

He spit out a mouthful of innards, grimacing at the taste, and took a deep breath, thankful he could finally breathe.

The creature was going crazy, spinning around and trying to figure out how to remove the pain inside it.

Smiling, Max knew what to do next as he started casting his fire area-of-effect spell. When it went off, the creature's innards erupted in flames, blowing out guts through the holes at the top and bottom of its body. The force threw Max up and out, landing on top of the boss as it started to wobble.

An explosion against the side of the boss caught Max’s attention, and fire swept over its body. Max smiled, realizing Tanila had joined the fight, as more spells began to slam into the boss’s carapace.

Running to the midsection of the boss, Max took his halberd out of storage and drove it down into the carapace. A small crack appeared, and the boss began to thrash side to side, attempting to throw Max off it. Instead, Max grabbed onto one of the many long hairs that ran along the boss’s body.

Driving his weapon down again, the impact shattered part of the carapace and created a hole. Max grinned, seeing it was big enough for what he needed.

Storing his weapon again, he put his hand inside the hole and powered up a lightning blast. Pouring most of his mana into it, he unleashed the spell and was immediately thankful he had held the spider's hair tight as its entire body began to shake and spasm.

The stench of burnt flesh filled his nostrils, and Max decided to go for broke once more.

Right before he could cast the spell again, the boss tipped sideways, and Max saw a colossal ice spear lodged in the place where its eyes should be.

The boss continued to fall over as Max held on tight, preparing for the impact against the ground.

Its body slammed into the earth, sending up a huge cloud of dust while also creating a shockwave that sent dirt and stone everywhere.

Max found himself flying toward the dirt as the hair he had been holding onto for dear life snapped.

[Regeneration]

Slamming feet first into the ground, Max cried out in pain as his left leg snapped from the angle and speed he hit.

A wave of healing came over him, and his regeneration also helped. His bones moved back into position and fused together.

Panting, he stood up and moved to where he knew Batrire and Fowl were.

[Regeneration Canceled]

“You all ok?” Max shouted as he joined the others.

“We’re fine!” Batrire yelled back. “Did you kill it?”

Max realized the boss was actually dead when he heard the question.

“It had to be Tanila. I didn’t get anything from it.”

“Holy elf tits, you missed out!” Fowl said as Max arrived next to them. “I gained over half a level from that damn beast.”

“I won’t complain,” Max said with a slight sigh. “I would have liked to see what I would have gotten, but everyone living is the best thing. Besides, your armor looks a bit–”

“Holy dwarf balls!”

They all turned toward Tanila, who was approaching them, drawn by their voices as the dust finally settled down.

“What?” Fowl called out. “You need to see my blessed ones?”

Tanila arrived, her face covered in sweat, and Max could tell she was almost out of mana.

“Sorry… I killed it,” she said, frowning.

“It’s fine. Better to do that than let it eat Fowl again.”

The three of them chuckled while Fowl snarled. “What was worthy of talking about my balls?” he asked.

Tanila’s eyes widened, and her face lit up as she remembered why she had cursed. “Quick, come this way and see why!”

They followed her around the hulking corpse, and as Max got closer, he spotted an object on the spider's underside.

“A key!” Fowl shouted. “A goddamn key!”

“I think that’s worthy of that curse,” Max teased as he gently bumped Tanila.

Some crashing sounds came, and the four of them turned, looking at the burning forest as the fire continued to spread. More trees fell over as they succumbed to the destruction Max and Tanila had unleashed.

Without waiting, Max ran and jumped onto the massive spider's corpse, feeling its body crunch under his steps. He ignored the hole where Tanila had sent a spear through its head.

The key was about a foot longer than the one they had gotten from the skeleton boss, and it gave off a dark glow.

Grabbing it, Max stored it, then quickly moved back to the rest of the party.

“Now what?” Fowl asked as the four of them stood together.

“Harvest those fangs!” Tanila said. “If we make it out of this, those will probably be something Everett would trade his kingdom for.

“*Harvest its fangs*,” Fowl repeated in his best imitation of a female elf voice. “Looks like you and I are up, warrior boy.”

Max nodded and pulled his weapon back out of storage. “You two rest and try to recover. My lackey and I are going to see what we can do about getting these things off.”

For about five minutes, Max hacked with his weapon, over and over, around the spider's mouth. Fowl screamed like a frightened dwarf when the fangs suddenly moved, coming in on each other after Max hit some nerve.

Not stopping his attempts at hacking the creature to bits, Max promised to not tease him about it too often.

When they finally got the first one free, Max lifted it up, amazed at how massive it was.

“That thing has to be worth something,” Fowl declared. “I mean, it didn’t even chip when you hit it.”

Nodding, Max stored it and turned to start on the other one when Batrire whistled at them.

“We got four spiders incoming! Normal ones!”

Fowl put his helmet back on and groaned as he pulled his shield and hammer out of storage. “Looks like I get to be bit again.”

Max nodded, pointing at the warped section of Fowl’s armor. “It's a good thing she didn’t kill you when she gave you a kiss.”

“She? How do you know it was a female spider?” Fowl asked.

Laughing, Max jogged to where their two teammates awaited them. “That’s easy. No guy would want to kiss an ugly mug like yours.”

Fowl laughed and moved into position as he located the four spiders Batrire had called out. “Well, protect me from these four. I can’t handle being treated by all these female spiders wanting a piece of me.”

Batrire groaned as she recast the buff spell on the party. “Stop yacking and protect us, you fool. I’m the only one dumb enough to want to kiss you.”

With the second fang in his storage, Max looked at the fire they had started. It was dying down, and only a third of the trees had been engulfed. Two-thirds of the trees were still left to burn, but Max began to consider a possibility he saw.

“You three want to try something stupid?”

“More than normal?” Tanila asked, turning her attention to where Max was looking.

He nodded and pointed at the trees they had set fire to first. “I think it might be safe to go in there and push into the woods that way. If the fire has burnt out, we could try traveling through the burnt area instead of staying here. We might be able to find the exit and, hopefully, the chest that key goes to.”

Fowl shrugged and looked at Batrire, who only winced once before nodding.

“I guess it beats worrying about getting eaten,” Batrire declared. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Max laughed and tapped the ground with his foot. “An army of spiders gathers here, and we have to face them?”

“It was a rhetorical question, you moron,” Batrire replied. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

Smiling, Max moved next to Tanila.

“So my berserker upgrade is a little better. I can fight against the rage for a moment, but it does come with a cost.”

Tanila looked at Max and realized he had never shared what the upgrade actually did. “What does it do now?”

[Skill Description - Berserker]

*****

Berserker - Uncommon Skill: When activated, your strength and attack speed will double for fourteen seconds, but you will be consumed by rage. Tactics and self-preservation will be lost unless the user has a strong will and can briefly focus their attacks. When the user adjusts their focus, the strength and attack speed bonus will be reduced by half. If the target is killed before the effect ends, the duration will reset, and the closest enemy will be chosen as the new target. There is no limit to the number of times the duration can be reset. May only be activated once every twenty-four hours.

*****

“Wow… that is huge. Four seconds more, but also being able to think? How does that work?” Tanila asked.

Max checked part of the area as they neared the edge of the woods, holding his hand out toward the ash-covered ground. “It’s not too hot. I think we can go through.”

Stepping on the ash-filled dirt, Max slowed down and waited for Tanila to rejoin him. “I’m not certain, but I think my intelligence and wisdom being as high as they are allow me to do that. It also made me think about how my… whatever inside me was able to control it.”

Tanila grunted and shook her head. “We really need to name that.”

“My skill?”

She nodded and tapped her chin for a moment. “A good name. Something that will strike fear in all the other skills we encounter.”

Max could see the grin Tanila had. “What are you thinking?”

“What about Bob?”

Roaring with laughter, Max nodded. “I like it… Bob.”

A growl of displeasure came from inside him, but Max just shook his head. “I’m not certain Bob is happy about that name.”

Both of them started laughing as they walked through the smoldering remains of the woods.

“Elves and humans are weird,” Fowl whispered as they followed a few yards behind Max and Tanila. “Who the hell laughs like that while walking through a burnt-down forest?”

Batrire nodded and shrugged. “Crazy humans and elves.”

They both chuckled and laughed.

“We’re crazy too for following 'em,” Batrire said, “but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

BOOK 2 - Royal Road Take down for AMAZON - AAACKKK

BOOK 2 - Royal Road Take down for AMAZON - AAACKKK - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

I got a message, and we totally forgot to announce that I MUST take down book 2 on SUNDAY night for release on April 23rd! Typically I try to give a weeks notice but alas - I forgot having covid this week.

You can read it on Amazon - Kindle / Kindle Unlimited, but at this moment, I have only about 30 hours left before I have to take it down!

SO, binge-read if you're behind (or wait for Amazon).

Sorry for the rules!

Side note - Book 4 is finished (Just need to edit), and I'm working on book 5 soon!

136 - Finding What One Looks For

136 - Finding What One Looks For - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“You’re going to have to try and freeze that section,” Tanila said. "I don't want to use all of my mana, and you can recover some if you kill something.”

An ice bolt started forming near Max’s hand. After it had grown to the size he wanted, he released it at the section of burning trees blocking the path they were taking.

It hit one and shattered about a third of the trunk into tiny pieces. Sizzling and popping sounds came from the ice that landed in the fire all around it.

“Shame you're not stronger,” Fowl teased as they waited on the cooldown for Max’s spell. “This wouldn’t take so long if you could cast real magic like Tanila.”

“Oh, I’ll show you real magic when I freeze your nuts later,” Max replied as he pointed his hand toward Fowl’s crotch.

“Bah! You can’t do that,” protested Fowl. “Batrire wouldn’t like them being blue!”

A groan came from their healer, who shook her head in embarrassment.

“I can’t take him anywhere… not even to a dungeon,” she muttered.

Max smiled, then returned to the fire blocking their path, preparing to unleash another bolt of ice.

“How far do you reckon we have come in this forest? At least halfway?” Tanila asked after he cast the spell a second time.

“I’d hope, but,” he glanced back at the path they had come down, “it’s hard to tell. Right now, I just wanna find the chest and the portal and get out of here.”

“We’re still getting a little bit of experience, though,” Fowl said. “I’ve gained as much as during that first fight, or more, since we started exploring. Somewhere, spiders are dying.”

Hours passed before Max and the rest of the group finally found the edge of the forest. A wall of magic surrounded the dungeon floor, which projected a barrier at the edge of the last tree.

“It doesn’t look like the spiders could climb up this,” Max said as he ran his hand along the invisible wall.

Tanila nodded as she studied the barrier. “I’ve heard of dungeons that end in stone or have massive walls, but ones with these kinds of barriers aren’t usually in this low of a dungeon. The tower will have some floors like this, usually in a boss room to prevent adventurers from creating safe points to fight from.”

“You mean holes in walls?” Max asked.

She nodded as they turned to look back at the forest. “There are levels in the tower where you can dig through the ground or mine through a wall until you can’t. Depending on what you’re fighting, some groups and raids have used that to their advantage, preparing defensive areas inside a cliffside and bringing their quarry to them.”

“That’s kind of smart,” Max said with a laugh. “Almost as smart as burning a forest down.”

A groan came from Fowl. “Stop making yourself feel good. You had one amazing idea; let's see if it pans out.'

Max grinned and pointed in the direction they had decided to go. “Let’s stop waiting and see if we can find the chest and get something good.”
As they began walking toward the smoldering section of trees, Batrire gently nudged Fowl, “Maybe you should use the key in case it's another mimic.”

Everyone but Fowl laughed at that comment.

After eight more hours of trudging through the charred forest they had created, Max let out a tiny *whoop* when he spotted a chest sitting in a very small clearing.

“Ok, Fowl, you’re up,” Max said as he pulled the huge key out, still amazed at how large it was compared to his torso.

“No sir,” Fowl replied, waving his hands. “There isn’t anything you could offer me to do that again.”

“You certain?” Max asked, holding it out to his dwarf friend.

“Absolutely! Not even if Ockrim himself showed up and told me to do it.”

Batrire groaned and rolled her eyes.

“Ok, I’ll do it, but just remember, you didn’t want to so I get the first crack at any shared loot!” Max exclaimed as he started jogging toward the chest.

About three seconds after Max finished his statement, Fowl processed what he said and started running after Max, shouting, “Wait! I changed my mind!”

Max glanced back at Batrire and Tanila, who were about twenty yards away, each with a hand on Fowl’s shoulder.

Grumbling could still be heard from the dwarf as Max took a deep breath and approached the chest.

It was the same size as the last raid chest they had acquired. Made of dark metal, it gave off a weird humming sound, and an aura of black light seemed to pulse from it.

“Wish it was Fowl opening that,” Tanila muttered as Max moved the key toward the chest.

Fowl’s complaint was ignored as the key moved from Max’s hand on its own and inserted itself in the huge keyhole. It turned, and a clicking sound could be heard.

Max had already taken a few steps back and pulled out his weapon, preparing for the worst. After nothing happened, he moved forward and tapped it gently with his weapon.

“If it was going to eat you, it would have already grabbed you!” shouted Fowl.

Max held up a middle finger toward Fowl and then stored his weapon. He pushed up with two hands on the lid, and the chest top snapped open.

Inside it sat a much darker than normal dimensional space, and within the void were eight items, all of the same black color as the chest.

“It’s safe, but you four give me a minute! I’m going to collect everything first!”

Fowl was moving the moment Max said, '*It's safe,'* running as fast as his little legs could carry him.

"Wait, ya bastard!" Fowl shouted.

Smiling, Max pretended to reach into the chest, laughing as Fowl started running faster.

"That's one ugly staff," Fowl said as he pointed at Tanila's new equipment.

Scrunching her eyebrows, Tanila looked at her staff and then back at Fowl. "What's wrong with it?"

"It doesn't go with your outfit at all."

Rolling her eyes, Tanila ignored Fowl and ran her hand along the new staff. Very thin crystal-like strands ran through the black metal, their pattern almost like a spiderweb. She had immediately traded out her old one, amazed at how much better the new one was.

"Yer talking about outfits, and you got that damn plate chest piece on. One black piece and the rest of yer outfit doesn't match," Batrire said as she pointed at Fowl's new chest piece. "Even worse are the lines running along yours."

Shifting from side to side, Fowl spun. "I look dandy, and you know it. Besides, not everyone gets a cool tiara like you… not even Tanila."

Batrire's grin grew as she tapped her head, raising her eyebrows a few times. "Ockrim likes me more than you," she said.

Max had said nothing, letting the other three enjoy the first crack at their items.

"Seth?"

Looking up from the helmet he had in his hands, he saw how she smiled softly at him.

"Yeah?" he replied, still amazed at what he was holding.

"Going to share the stats?"

Nodding, he couldn't help but grin as he slid it over his head.

A gasp came from Batrire when his brand-new black helmet vanished after he took his hands off it.

"Where's yer damn helm?!" exclaimed Fowl.

"Invisible. It's an ability of the helm," Max replied, banging his hand against the side of his head. As his gloves hit his helm, a slight sound of metal on metal proved that it was still there.

"Gods, that is so unfair!" Fowl complained. "Now, I must stare at your bald head all day!"

“What about the stats?” Tanila asked. “It’s obviously better than your old one.”

Nodding, Max grinned.

[Inspect Helmet]

*****

Scout Spider Helm

+5 STR/CON/DEX

Invisible State

Minor Poison Resist

Bonded

*****

“HOLY MOTHER OF GOD LOVIN ELF TI–”

Batrire’s staff smacked into Fowl’s head, interrupting him as he proclaimed his curses for the entire dungeon to hear.

“Shut it, or you’ll bring the whole dungeon down on us,” Batrire snapped.

“That’s… impressive,” Tanila said. “Even though all of ours have a plus five to two stats yet again, as Fowl would say, someone up there loves you.”

Max frowned as he saw everyone looking at him.

“There are still four items waiting for us to roll on them.”

Fowl stopped massaging the spot on his head where Batrire had bopped him and grinned, knowing what was coming next.

“A cloak, boots, belt, and what looks like a helm or circlet, depending on who gets it,” Max said. “I would prefer the cloak or the boots. I’m not sure I will give up my belt piece yet.”

“I’ll do boots or helm,” Fowl said.

“Only really need the circlet or belt,” Tanila stated as they went in a circle.

“I’d only really want the belt,” Batrire declared, pointing at her waist. “Momma needs something to keep this robe tight.”
“Ok, so Batrire gets the belt, Tanila gets the circlet, Fowl gets the boots, and I get the cloak?” Max asked only needing a moment to figure out how it would best work.

“Sounds good to me!” exclaimed Fowl as he moved up next to the chest. “Can I go first so I can protect my toes in case Batrire decides to step on them?”

Everyone chucked and nodded, letting Fowl go first. When the boots materialized in his hand, Fowl scowled slightly.

“Bah, not as flashy as I had hoped, but I can’t complain, even if they look ugly.”

Max nodded at the weird crystal design on the boots' backs and sides. The crystal lines did not have a specific pattern.

"They provide a nice boost to my strength and constitution. Four points each!" Fowl exclaimed.

Batrire went next and got a black cord that cinched itself around her waist. She smiled as she put it on, and grinned even more at the fact it gave four points each to constitution, intelligence, and wisdom.

Fowl started to complain, but when she raised her staff he stopped, holding his hands up in surrender.

"Your turn, Tanila."

She nodded at Max and reached inside the chest. When the timer ended, a black circlet with a single clear crystal in the center of a spiderweb sat in her hand. Slipping it onto her head, she smiled. "How's it look?"

'Beautiful as always," Max said with a sigh, causing Tanila's cheeks to redden a little.

"And the stats?" Fowl asked. "Don't forget the stats!"

Touching the black metal with her fingers, Tanila nodded. "Five to intelligence and wisdom, and it has a Clarity effect."

Batrire whistled. "That's really nice. What's the bonus?"

"Twenty-five percent," Tanila said, wincing as she did.

"Holy dwarf balls," groaned Batrire. "Twenty-five percent! That's–"
She stopped ranting when Fowl poked her in the stomach.

"Hey now, don't bring the dungeon down on us," he teased.

"But twenty-five percent!" Batrire exclaimed.

"Someday you'll get something nice," Fowl replied before turning to Max. "Alright, chosen one of the gods, make me cry."

Chuckling, Max nodded and reached into the chest, touching the spot where the cloak was.

The timer finished, and a black cloak appeared in his hands.

Even before he put it on or inspected it, he could feel its power radiating through his hands.

"Don't tell me," Fowl muttered. "I can already tell I'm going to be extremely jealous."

Tanila moved forward and touched the cloak with her fingers, looking at it in surprise.

"What is it, Tanila?" Batrire asked, seeing the mage's face change.

"It's spidersilk," Tanila replied.

137 - Finishing The Dungeon

137 - Finishing The Dungeon - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

[Inspect Cloak]

*****

Cloak of the Spider

+5 Dex

Spider Walk - Lasts five minutes, twenty-four hour cooldown.

Bonded

*****

Max blinked a few times as he stared at the notification.

What the hell is Spider Walk?

“Goblin shite, Seth!” Fowl groaned, “Tell us what you got!”

Max snorted, then nodded as he tried to figure out what it meant.

“I’m not sure about the part about being made of spider silk, but yeah… It's called the Cloak of the Spider and has five dexterity and an ability called Spider Walk. Do you have any ideas what that is?”

Fowl immediately looked at Tanila, waiting to hear what she would say.

“It seems obvious,” Tanila said as she let go of the fabric she had been running through her fingers.

“Obvious? Like he’ll grow six more legs if he puts it on?”

Batrire groaned. “Gods, he needs to put more points into intelligence… No, it sounds like Max can do stuff a spider can do. I’m guessing climb walls?”

“Was that a question?” Max asked.

“Yes. Yes, it was,” replied Batrire. “If we find a tree that isn’t on fire or a wall not protected by the barrier, I guess you can try.”

“Yeah, but it has a twenty-four hour cooldown.”

The chest suddenly vanished in a cloud of black smoke, and a few seconds later, the portal appeared, pulsing with the usual blue glow.

“That was easy,” Fowl stated. “Should we take it or wait?”

“Why would we wait?” Batrire asked. “We got loot and a portal to the boss room.”

Shaking his head, Fowl tapped his helmet. “Think, woman, think. We’re still getting experience without doing a thing. Sure, it might take a while, but can you really pass up free experience for sitting on yer arse? Even if we take turns keeping watch and leave the moment something shows up, we’re already up half a level. Soon we’ll be forty-four!”

“He’s got a point for once,” Tanila said. “We’ve got food, water, and a campfire. I’m game if everyone else is.”

Max laughed. “Wait a second, I’m getting the raw end of this deal. I’ll be hanging out, getting nothing.”

“Blame the gods who normally kiss yer golden arse,” Fowl replied. “I’d gladly take no experience for the stuff yer getting.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I want to rest first. Some of us don’t get to relax in fights while getting kissed by a spider.”

Extending his middle finger, Fowl grumbled and moved off toward the trees.

“Where is he going?” Tanila asked.

“Beats me, but I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough,” answered Batrire.

A minute later, the dwarf returned carrying a decent-sized rock in his arms. He dropped it a few yards from the group and plopped down on it. “Fine, get some rest. I’ll keep watch for a few.”

No one hesitated, pulling camping gear out of storage and laying it on the ground.

“Try not to snore too much, my dear,” Fowl teased. “I don’t want the entire dungeon coming for us.”

Max was bored out of his mind, and reading the books he kept in storage only did so much to help pass the time. He had gotten some sleep and felt great and even Batrire and Tanila were ready to go.

“Experience has almost stopped,” Tanila said. “It’s been almost an hour with nothing.”

“Sounds like it's time to move on. I’ll get Fowl.”

Max put his book away and rolled up the blanket he had been sitting on. As he did, Max noticed that Tanila was watching him.

“You ok? Need something?”

She shook her head, lips pulled together tight. “Just… trying to figure things out.”

Nodding, Max stored his blanket and stood. “I’m in no hurry. I’ll always be here if you want to talk.”
Closing her eyes, Tanila took a deep breath and slowly released it. When she opened her eyes, she smiled at him. “When you say stuff like that, it makes all this harder on me.”

“What? Being honest?”

“No… I know you’re honest. It’s… you know who I am and don’t care. I know you don’t see me for what I was born or the title I hold, even if I don’t care about it. You… don’t treat me differently because I pushed you away for being afraid of your skill. I just need to figure things out. Does that make sense?”

Moving over to Tanila, Max held out his hand. She paused a moment before putting hers in his. Giving her hand a gentle squeeze, Max dropped to a knee and smiled when Tanila’s eyes began to bulge.

“I’m not doing that, so stop worrying,” Max quickly assured her.

A sigh of relief came from Tanila, and then she chuckled for a moment.

“All I’m doing is promising that I won’t hurt you. Me,” Max said as he tapped his chest. “I’m always going to care about you, and if you decide you want to be with me, I’m here. If not, at least I still have a friend.”

A cough came, and both turned to see Fowl and Batrire rocking back and forth on their feet.

“Not to interrupt whatever this is, but I really need to go,” Fowl said.

“Why is that?” Max asked as he let go of Tanila’s hand and stood.

Grunting, the dwarf grimaced. “Yeah… we need to defeat the boss and then get somewhere with a safe and clean spot to use the restroom.”

Everyone laughed except Fowl, who frowned at the three of them.

“Sorry, some of us can’t just go in the woods like the rest of ya. I really need a place to sit!”

“Use your helm,” Max joked as he moved toward the portal.

“How about I use your helm, and we can call it fair?”

As the two warriors moved toward the portal, Batrire quickly relocated herself next to Tanila.

“Should I ask what that was about?”

Tanila sighed and shook her head. “That man is either a genius when it comes to playing the strings of my heart or the luckiest fool there is because of how he always makes me feel.”
Batrire chuckled and pointed at the two men waiting for them by the portal.

“Trust me, if I’ve learned anything about men from Fowl, it's typically the latter.”

Both started laughing, smiling as the men stared questionably at them.

“That was disappointing,” Fowl declared as the boss disappeared and a chest appeared. “You’re really going to have to let me do more. If you don’t, I’m just going to sit back and read a book while you do all the hard work.”

“That won’t happen,” Batrire teased. “You can’t read.”

Max was already lifting the lid before the others had made it to him.

“Sorry, I didn’t expect the boss to die so fast. That was pretty cool, though, if I do say so myself. Regardless, the two dexterity and wisdom I got was nice.”

“Yeah, it's hard to complain about a fourteen-foot-tall spider after facing one almost ten feet taller,” replied Fowl.

In the chest were four pairs of leggings, each black and red to match the spider's appearance. Next to them were black bands with the words "Spider Princess" etched into them.

“Spider Princess… seems a bit...” Max paused, noticing Tanila looking at him. “Regal.”

A raspberry came from Fowl. “That wasn’t what you were going to say, and we all know it.”

Shrugging, Max pulled his leggings out of the chest along with his boss token and sighed.

“These pants aren’t already identified,” Max complained.

“Nothing like normal loot, I guess,” Fowl muttered. “Can’t have everything be nice.”

“So we go turn in this stuff, and then what?” Batrire asked.

“We go back to the inn and shower,” Tanila replied. “We’ve been in this dungeon for a while. I doubt Alexander considers us a lost cause, but I don’t like being gone this long without warning him.”

“You all look like an ogre had its way with you,” joked Alexander as the group relaxed in their usual booth. I'm glad to see you’re back. Is there anything worth reporting?”

“Oh, we just decided to camp out in a dungeon and see what that was like. We've got to prepare for the tower at some point,” Max replied. “Did anything special happen while we were gone?”

Alexander nodded as he poured a drink for Batrire and then started working on Tanila’s before he replied. “There were a few things in the city. An ale fest down in the city's southwest section is going on today and tomorrow. It’s not an official one, but after the dungeon breaks that took place, the brewers' guild wanted to give people something to celebrate. Then there is an eating contest tomorrow in the northwest section of town. Lots of food and fun, again all aimed at helping people to move past the break.”

Max looked at Fowl, who smiled immediately as their eyes met.

“What time does the ale fest kick off tomorrow?” Fowl asked, rubbing his hands together in excitement.

Alexander laughed, grabbing Fowl’s empty tankard and refilling it. “It starts at lunchtime but doesn’t really get going until evening. If you want to partake in some

of the games, I'd suggest waiting until around dinnertime when more people are there."

"Fowl…" Batrire said, her tone so low it almost sounded like a growl.

"No complaining, babe. We earned this. Tomorrow, Seth and I are going to the festival and having a few drinks."

"Tanila help me out," Batrire pleaded. "You know how he gets when he's drunk."

Laughing, Tanila shook her head and picked up her glass, taking a long drink before setting it down with a thud.

"Sorry, Fowl's right this time. We all need to go. Even you," Tanila replied.

After Alexander refilled his glass, Max slid the man a small pouch. "Rent for another month if you don't mind. I think we can all agree this is our home for another month."

Grinning from ear to ear, Alexander gave a quick bow and took the coin pouch, putting it in his apron. "I appreciate that, I really do. After all the things that have happened… I had kind of wondered if you four might strike out for somewhere else. Soon enough, though, I know you'll be leaving me."

"How's that?" Fowl asked.

"I hear things," Alexander replied as he winked at Fowl. "Some say you four are making a name for yourself and have already signed with a Faction. If that's the case, it tells me the four of you will soon be going into the tower, and once that happens… you won't be living here anymore."

"That doesn't mean we can't stop by," Max said. "After all, you make one of the best pineapple upside-down cakes I've ever had."

"And I'll make one for you all the day before you leave me, if you tell me!" exclaimed Alexander. "It's the least I could do."

"I'm always down for cake," Fowl stated, rubbing his belly with both hands.

Groaning, Batrire poked Fowl in the stomach, and everyone laughed as he started to giggle.

"Well, I'll leave you four to relax. I'll have your food out soon. I hope you enjoy the festival tomorrow. If you get drunk, remember to secure transportation home instead of trying to walk back."

"Bah, no dwarf ever gets so drunk they can't make it home," Fowl protested.

Laughing, Alexander left the jug on the table and moved to check on some of the other patrons in his place.

"You're serious about going tomorrow, right Seth?"

"Heck ya!" Max replied with a single nod of his head. "We've been risking our arses every day for the last few weeks. A day off and a night out seems like a good idea. We can hit the faction house to turn in some stuff and then take care of a few other things before hitting the festival in time for the fun."

“Guess I better start drinking then,” Fowl declared before he started chugging his tankard.

“I’ll blame you for all this, Seth,” Batrire said as she pointed a finger at the dwarf with an upturned tankard and ale running down his beard. “You have no idea what beast you have awoken.”

Glancing at Tanila, Max saw her smile and nod.

“He can get a little out of hand. Hopefully not too bad, though.”

138 - Tower Explained

[138 - Tower Explained - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“One more time because I’m having trouble really understanding what you mean by, *‘this happens more than you would believe*,’ Everett said as he looked at the trophies they had laid on his table. “You’re saying this has happened to you how many times?”

During their carriage ride to the faction house, Max and the other three had decided they needed to come clean about their luck in the dungeons.

Tanila had stated multiple times that the man wouldn’t share any information about their drops or success with anyone, and knowing he had a group who seemed blessed by the gods would only make him treat them better.

“At least four times?” Max asked as he looked at the others. “I think that’s right.”

Rubbing his eyes with his fingers, Everett chose to groan instead of cursing like he had initially planned.

“And the spider you defeated… the one with these massive fangs,” Everett said as he tapped the four-foot-long fangs on the table, “it was twenty-two feet tall?”

“Roughly,” Fowl replied. “All I know is it hurt when it dropped me after nearly crushing me between those things.”

Everett closed his eyes for the hundredth time since they entered his office as he considered the information, running his hand through his white hair and groaning softly.

Eventually, his eyes snapped open, and he looked at the four of them. Max could see the man had questions he wanted to ask.

“I appreciate the honesty, and I can see how much trust you are putting in me by sharing these things…”

“But?” Tanila asked, smiling as she prompted the man.

“But… I would assume that a creature of that size in a dungeon like you described would mean it was a chest guardian boss. Am I correct?”

“It was.”

Fowl chuckled at Everett’s face, scrunching like he was trying to pass gas.

“I don’t suppose… no, ignore that… I’m just a little envious… in all my years of adventuring, I’ve seen one chest guardian, and that battle wasn’t fun. I can only imagine how yours went and what you acquired from it”.

Max noticed Everett absently spun a ring on his thumb while he talked about that event.

“What we really want to know is how will this affect our climb through the tower? Are we going to be running into creatures that will be far beyond our level? And what happens if other groups are on the same floor? Then who gets the first crack at it?”

Tsking his tongue, Everett nodded at each question Max asked.

“Those are some specific questions, and the answer to each depends on the circumstances,” Everett replied as a massive rolled-up parchment appeared. A pen came next, and then Everett transferred the two fangs from the stone table into his storage and unrolled the parchment.

“Come over here, and let me show you four something.”

Max and the others gathered around the stone table.

“Is that a floor in the tower?” Fowl asked.

“It is. This is the first floor and the only one that has never changed. After the first floor, there is no rhyme or reason for what the floor will change to, the monsters, or the layout. The only thing that has always remained consistent, as long as anyone can remember, is that while someone is on a floor, it will not change.”

“Does that mean the factions keep someone camped out on them?” Batrire asked.

“A long time ago, they did,” Everett replied. “Eventually, it was noticed that doing so limited the rate at which creatures would respawn, as well as the number of rare items to be gathered on that floor. Another effect was that the higher floors of the tower became harder.”

Everett began to circle a few locations on the map.

“The tower isn’t like a normal dungeon, and people have many different beliefs or opinions about it. Some feel it's alive. Others believe it's something else, but I won’t get into that now.”

Everett had drawn arrows and lines at certain points on the map. He looked at it for a few more seconds and then made one final addition before turning his attention to the party across the table.

“The first floor is about twenty miles across. I won’t spoil the fights or the creatures. Tom will be responsible for preparing you for that. I want you to notice these areas I’ve marked.”

He tapped the one closest to the entrance and smiled. “Sometimes, a rare creature can appear here. It’s completely random, and no one knows when it will appear or

why it only happens here. The first test of this theory of yours about being blessed by the gods will be if it is there. Next is over here."

He pointed the end of his pen to another circle he had drawn and tapped it a few times.

"This one is rarer. Maybe three or five times a year, it spawns. If it happens to be there, don't hesitate to attack it. Some tower climbers used to camp out and wait for it, but as I mentioned before, the tower seems to know and reacts accordingly."

"Do factions share knowledge of rare spawns and their drops?" Max asked as he watched Everett begin to move his pen again.

"Gods, no… if you find one, do not tell anyone but me or Tom. It sounds bad to say it like that, but there will be crystals that drop from the creatures you kill. Those are used for a variety of things, but one of those things is our skill crystal."

Max started to ask another question, but Everett held up his hand. "Just wait, I'll answer in a minute."

He put his pen on one circle and then, using a finger from each hand, tapped two other circles he had drawn.

"These three… they are the real test."
Max and the others saw Everett's face change. His lips pulled inward, and his cheeks got tight.

"I've been in this position a long time… the woman before me…" Everett paused and sighed. "Our faction has only encountered one of these three spawns once during our time in this position. To get one of them would mean more than you three can know."

A moment later, Everett's demeanor changed again, and he smiled at the four of them again.

"Now, what was your question, Seth?"

"These crystals they drop, what are they used for?"

A slight chuckle came from Everett as he looked off to the side for a moment. A pouch appeared in the palm of the older man's hand. He opened it and pulled out a handful of gems about an inch in length with a slight yellow tint. He gave one to each of them and then pulled one out for himself.

"Watch."

Smashing the gem in his hand, a slight buzz could be heard, and then a yellow light flashed and was gone.

"You try."

Max, Batrire, and Fowl all tried to squeeze or smash the gem in their hand, but no one managed to do it. Tanila stood there, smiling and holding hers.

"Not going to try?" Everett asked.

"It's not possible, and you know it. Until we first enter the tower, we can't absorb the power inside them."

Grinning, Everett nodded and put his pouch back into storage. “You four can keep those. A little treat once you enter the tower.”

“It was a test,” Max said, realizing what had happened. “You and Tom have talked.”

Laughing loudly, Everett nodded. “He had mentioned a few things and his beliefs. No specifics, but I’ve known him long enough to read between the lines, and I also had my own concerns. Tanila is right, though. Those are the next steps in the process of getting stronger. You will find the colors change the higher you climb, and you can no longer gain experience from the lower-level ones. As you can see, the one I used vanished. I gained nothing from it, but the power was still consumed. Now, there is a lot more Tom will go over, but let me get back to the crystals the boss and rare spawns drop.”

Everett pulled a small chest out of his storage and set it on the table. He slowly looked at each of them, and his eyes were different.

“I’m going to show you this only because you have revealed your hand to me.”

After turning the chest towards them, he slowly opened it. Inside was a yellow pulsating gem the size of Fowl’s head.

“This gem is used for our skill shard. It gives it the power required to increase your skills into the higher ranks. I won’t bore you with specifics, but I’ll give you four one free major upgrade. Choose who uses it wisely. It takes a few of these crystals to provide the power that kind of upgrade. The later ranks… let’s just say you’ll have to earn them through a lot of hard work.”

“What about the adventurer halls? How do they get energy for their shards? Do they use these?”

Everett smiled and shook his head. “I guess you really wouldn’t know. All those trophies you collect are used to power their shard.”

Closing the lid, Everett stored the chest and smiled at the group. “I’ll get you a copy of this map when it’s time to go inside. Do you have any other questions or things you need to know? I’m certain a few of my leaders are waiting to hear what transpired in our meeting today.”

“Actually, we are planning on going to the ale festival,” Fowl said with a smile.

Everett chuckled and flipped a gold coin to Fowl. “Enjoy the first round on me. It’s good you all realize the importance of living and enjoying life.”

Fowl snatched the coin out of the air, holding it up for Batrire to see.

“See! Even the gods must want us to drink!”

She groaned and rolled her eyes. “Dear Ockrim, we are going to be in trouble tonight.”

Max walked next to Tanila, laughing and smiling as they watched Fowl holding four tankards of ale in one arm while drinking a fifth one he had just collected.

“How much is he going to drink? I mean, that’s like seven so far?”

Tanila shrugged and motioned at Batrire, who looked animated as she said something to Fowl. “She was being serious last night. Fowl doesn’t drink a lot most days, but I have been present for one night of binging before, and you are in for a treat.”

Smiling, Max looked at all the lanterns and lights that were hung across the street. The main road that ran through this section of town was decorated, and there were stalls everywhere, each selling ale that never seemed to run out. The street was packed, adventurers and citizens alike all enjoying a night to forget the pain of a few days ago.

“You ok?” Tanila asked as Max walked with his hands clasped behind his back. “You’re not upset, are you?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s weird for me. For so long, I wasn’t sure how I was going to survive after that day… now I’m trying to remember how to actually live. I guess I was so focused on trying to get stronger and doing whatever I had to do that I forgot there is a life worth living outside the dungeons.”

Tanila shook her head and chuckled, seeing that Max was smiling, just slowly pushing himself through the crowd and trying to keep close with Fowl and Batrire.

“Everett was right,” Max continued, his eyes scanning the crowd of people laughing and drinking around them. “I have a reason for wanting to live. One day, I hope that reason realizes the same thing.”

Her eyes went wide as Tanila realized what Max had said.

Max simply smiled at her once more before turning his attention back to trying to find Fowl and Batrire as the crowd pressed in around them.

“Seth?”

He turned and saw Tanila looking at him, biting her bottom lip with her nose scrunched. “I’m trying. I really am.”

Laughing, Max gave her his best smile and nodded. “I know. No rush. Now, if you don’t mind, can you help me find our dwarven friends? Remember, one of us is vertically challenged.”

Tanila got up on her tiptoes and looked around, spotting her two dwarven allies.

“Found them. Let’s go shorty.”

“I’m going to kick your arse,” Fowl muttered, glaring playfully at Max, who was across the wooden table from him. “This trophy is mine.”

“Wanna wager on it?” Max asked. “We can do money or something else.”

Fowl ran his fingers through his wet beard, nodding slowly. “What do you have in mind?”

“A week of all harvesting duties, no matter what.”

Grimacing, Fowl tried to consider what dungeons were on their list for the next week.

“Wait… the apes… we’re doing them next, aren’t we?”

Max nodded and smiled. “You’re going to have to do some work regardless, but if you win like you think you will, imagine not having to harvest anything at all.”

“Deal! But no complaining when I win!” exclaimed Fowl.

They shook on it, and Max laughed, looking down at the twenty tables that had been lined up in the middle of the street. Every seat possible was filled on both sides of the tables.

“We gotta beat these people first,” Max said.

“Just follow my lead,” Fowl replied. “I’ll help you not pass out too quickly.”

Both of them laughed as the giant bell began to ring, signaling the start of the drinking contest.

“Those two are morons,” Batrire said with a sigh as she and Tanila watched their two men drink the first tankard of beer for the contest.

“They are, but they’re our morons.”

Both of them laughed, holding each other’s arm, enjoying a moment without having to worry about danger being right around every bend.

139 - Outdrinking a Dwarf

[139 - Outdrinking a Dwarf - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Max glanced at the remaining contestants in the drinking contest. Four tables were left, and a fair number of the real contenders were at the table with him and Fowl.

“What is it with dwarves and alcohol?” Max asked.

A loud roar of laughter came from the seven dwarves sitting at the table with him.

“While you were sucking on yer muthers teat, me mum waz feedin' me ale!” a blond-headed female dwarf roared. “I swear her teat was pure ale!”

The other dwarves, including Fowl, laughed and banged their empty tankards on the wooden table.

“She’s right!” Fowl exclaimed, wrapping an arm around one of the dwarves sitting beside him. “Drinking be a part of our life. Now, go ahead and quit before ya pass out!”

Some laughter and chuckles came from the other tables down the line, but Max saw that most of the contestants were barely holding on.

[Regeneration Expired]

Max just smiled and shrugged.

Maybe it is cheating, but at least no one is getting hurt...

“This be yer friend?” an orange-haired dwarf asked Fowl as he wrung out his ale-filled beard. “He seems half dwarf from how little he’s struggling.”

Fowl nodded and laughed. “He’s my half-brother from my ugly uncle's side!”

More laughter and hollering came as Max continued to smile.

The bell announcing the next round of drinks cut off all the laughter, and serious expressions suddenly appeared on every dwarf at his table.

“Alright, you boys and girls who think you’re going to take home the coveted *Helm of Drinking*, listen up!”

Max watched as a dwarf almost as wide as he was tall held up a helm he had shown off multiple times. The metal cap had two tankards attached on its side, and, from how everyone seemed to react, Max had half expected it to be made of solid gold instead of normal metal.

A pair of dwarves next to him were eating something as the man spoke, and when Max glanced a little closer, one of them held up a slab of butter.

“Sorry, hungry, and this man talks too much,” the dwarf said as he quickly slid the butter into his mouth and swallowed it whole.

Smacking his lips, Max nodded.

“For this round, we’ll be putting down three tankards, and you only have one minute to drink all three! No starting till the first bell, and each tankard must be empty and upside down when the bell sounds again!”

The moment he finished speaking, three tankards plopped down over Max's shoulder and placed in front of him. Three tankards began to appear before every contestant, each of them a little larger than the standard one.

“Gods, they’re really upping the ante early,” Fowl muttered. “Makes me glad I emptied my bladder before this started.”

Most of the dwarves nodded and laughed, while two of the smaller ones appeared a bit less excited that there were three more to finish.

“Remember,” Fowl said as he turned his cups so that the handle was to the side. “Follow my lead. You’re going to have to guzzle fast and keep the air low, or you’ll find it impossible to keep drinking.”

Max nodded, having spent the last few rounds practicing the guzzling technique Fowl was trying to teach him.

The bell rang, and men and women; dwarves, elves, and humans alike, grabbed their tankards and began guzzling their ale like horses at a trough after a long day of work.

Fowl and two other dwarves had one cup down and were on to their second tankard before the rest of the table finished their first.

Max finished about five seconds behind them but was still ahead of one of the dwarves.

When Max was halfway through his second tankard, Fowl put his down, letting out a massive four-second burp as he grabbed his last mug.

One of the dwarves finished at the same time as Fowl and slammed his cup down. He started to burp like Fowl had, only to begin vomiting on one of the other dwarves to his right instead.

In mere moments, the scene at the opposite end of his had turned into a group of dwarves failing the round as they gagged and choked on their ale while the tiny blond-haired dwarf continued to vomit up about five tankards of ale.

Slamming his second tankard down, Max kept an eye on the two dwarves next to him, each scooting closer to him while trying to avoid the unfolding disaster.

Fowl finished his third tankard, belching again as he smiled at Max, seemingly unconcerned with what had just happened.

“Chug! You got this!” Fowl shouted as Max let the liquid slide down his throat.

The last few gulps were the hardest as his stomach protested the sheer volume of liquid he was putting inside it.

With his eyes on the man counting down the time, Max finished with five seconds to spare, placing his cup upside down.

Fowl was beaming at him, shaking his fist in celebration. “Told you he was half dwarf!”

The crowd started to count down.

“Three…. Two… One…”

A brown-haired dwarf next to him, with a nice scar down his cheek, got his third cup upside down right before the bell sounded.

“That’s it!” the brewmaster shouted, bringing cheers and groans from the crowd.

Max finally looked down at the other end of the table, where the vomit-covered contestants seemed upset about their predicament. Some fighting and shouting took place for a moment, but within a few seconds, the group that had failed was gone.

“It appears we are down to six contestants! Give us a moment, ladies and gentlemen, to set up our final table!”

Fowl leaned across the table, extending a fist, and Max gave it a tap with his.

[Regeneration]

Immediately a flood of soothing relaxation came over Max. The amount of liquid in his stomach somehow began to be absorbed by his body, and the lightheaded feeling began to disappear.

“I wasn’t sure I was going to make it,” the scarred dwarf said. “Worst part is I really gotta piss… small dwarf bladder and all.”

Max couldn’t help but laugh, for the first time in longer than he could remember, not being the one who needed to take a wiz.

They sat at a long, ornate table that had been retrieved from wherever it had been hidden. It was taller than the ones they had been sitting at for the earlier rounds of the contest, and now their chairs almost looked like miniature thrones. They all faced the crowd of people who packed the streets, enjoying the moment.

Max was sitting at the end, Fowl was next to him, and past him were three more male dwarves and a female elf, all fighting for the win.

“Okay, from here on out, you’re on your own,” Fowl joked. “You know what’s coming next?”

Max shook his head.

“Just remember, drink fast and steady. Be careful when you burp, or you’ll have a problem like that dwarf did when he hurled. Keeping the air intake low is key, as this is going to be a sprint.”

As if on cue, servers began showing up on the other side of the table near the crowd, carrying trays with seven tankards on each. Each one was filled to the brim, spilling only a little bit as the servers transferred it to the table.

A different bell, like a dinner bell, rang, and the crowd quieted down.

“Alright you drunkards and lechers, now for the main event! For the first seven drinks of this round you got to finish one every thirty seconds! No starting the next till the bell rings! If you’re not finished when the bell rings, that’s it!”

Cheers rose, and Max glanced out over the crowd. He saw Batrire and Tanila clapping, but both were shaking their heads at him and Fowl.

“Our cheerleaders are clapping for us.”

Fowl looked where Max pointed and waved, earning himself an eye-roll from Batrire, who still smiled at her man.

The bell rang, and everyone started drinking their first drink.

Max noticed that Fowl didn’t finish as quickly as he had expected. The dwarf was a drinking machine.

Both of them finished with about ten seconds to spare, and a quick glance down the table showed that everyone was close to finishing at the same time.

The bell tolled again, and the second tankard hit everyone's lips as the crowd roared.

Max paced himself against Fowl, finding that he could finish about a second after his friend and still have eight seconds left.

The two dwarves closest to the elf almost missed the cutoff time, but with two seconds left, both had their cups on the table.

Round three found its first casualties. Two dwarves, one the dwarf with a scar on his face, were unable to finish before the bell rang.

The crowd got louder when the fourth round began as they saw contestants struggling.

[Regeneration]

Max felt relief as the volume of alcohol began to dissipate, and he chugged with renewed vigor. Fowl had risked a glance at him and began to chug faster as Max put the fourth mug down first between the two of them.

The bell tolled right as the dwarf next to Fowl Finished, and he immediately started on the fifth one.

He was eliminated as the bell rang, while Fowl, Max, and the elf all picked up a sixth tankard.

They each finished their sixth and seventh drink before the final ringing of the bell without any problems.

The crowd was going crazy at having one of each race still left.

The servers cleared the table of tankards and moved the three final contestants in front of the table.

“Alright! Let’s meet our three finalists!”

“On my right is the lovely elf, Seujjana!”

A loud roar sounded as the brown-haired elf gave a simple bow and smiled at the crowd.

“Next we have a man who needs no introduction if you caught his match in the Colosseum. Seth Pendal!”

Max was caught off guard by the number of people who cheered for him, a few in the crowd calling out how much they loved him.

When the din died down, the announcer bellowed out, “Let’s give it up for a dwarf and lover of ale, Fowl Hammerfall!”

Fowl stepped forward and bowed.

Cheers came from the dwarves community, and they began a chant, “Wet Beard! Wet Beard! Wet Beard!”

Max couldn’t help but laugh at the possible double meaning.

“Good luck,” Max said as he turned to Seujjana. She was wearing a light set of leather armor and appeared to be an archer if he recognized the calluses on her fingers.

“I think we’re both out of our league against that friend of yours,” she said, pointing at Fowl, who was still raising his hands as if he had already won. “I’ve watched him and you both. This isn’t his first time.”

“Part of me wants to ask where he is putting it.”

Seujjana laughed and nodded.

The dinner bell rang again, and the crowd began to groan and then laugh.

Turning around, the three of them saw three casks had been put on the table behind each of them. Each one had a spigot and a tube was being attached to it.

“Dear gods, we’re about to get hosed,” Fowl said with a chuckle.

“Um… what is about to happen?” Max asked, watching as the workers finished setting things up.

“No more help,” Fowl said with a wink. “Just remember, pretend it’s your mother's teat and suck like your life depends on it… and don’t vomit… or at least if you do, don’t do it on me.”

Max groaned as he started wondering if that might actually happen.

Each of them sat in a chair that was leaned back at a slight angle. They were given the tubes to put in their mouths.

Max quickly realized that this next round was going to be pretty bad if what he had supsected was correct.

“Last elf, human, or dwarf still drinking wins!” shouted the brewmaster to a roar from the crowd.

The massive dwarf waddled to where the three of them were sitting and laughed. “May Ockrim have mercy on your stomachs!” he roared.

Max took one last glance at Fowl and saw his friend taking a massive breath of air.

The bell rang, and a worker standing next to every cask turned the handle, sending a river of ale rushing into each of their mouths.

Max felt his eyes watering as the liquid flowed with a force he hadn’t expected. His tongue couldn’t hold back the flow of ale, and he tried to watch Fowl out of the corner of his eye, seeing his dwarven friend somehow swallowing massive gulps of ale.

His eyes are closed!

A glance at Seujjana showed her swallowing like a pro.

The ale was too much, and even with regeneration helping to fight the liquid sliding down his throat without an end, eventually, he choked, yanking the tube out and spewing ale from his nose and mouth.

Coughing, he heard the crowd chanting “chug chug chug” as the other two continued to somehow swallow the liquid.

His tube finally stopped pouring ale out to splash all over him as someone turned off the spigot.

Looking back and forth, Max watched from the best seat in the house as his friend and the elf did what he considered impossible.

He had no idea how either of them were breathing, but thirty seconds passed, and neither of them appeared to require air.

Both were getting red in the face and starting to tremble.

Seujjana and Fowl began to shake harder as the contest neared the end. The crowd sensed it, their voices almost shaking the table and the chairs the contestants sat in.

Suddenly, Seujjana jerked upward, yanking the tube from her mouth, and began spewing ale all over the ground.

The bell sounded, but Fowl kept on chugging for a few more seconds until someone turned his spigot off.

Max felt bad for Seujjana as she heaved, not at all regal or glamorous, but the woman didn’t seem to care as she emptied her stomach of the massive quantity of ale she had just swallowed.

Fowl took the tube that no longer was unleashing a torrent of ale and waved it above his head.

Cheers and applause came as Fowl attempted to stand and fell back into his chair.

“You did it!” Max shouted over the noise.

Fowl nodded, his eyes seeming to struggle to focus on anything.

“I did! I told you I–”

At that moment, the dam within Fowl broke, and Max lifted his legs off the ground just in time.

Never in his life had Max seen someone vomit so much up, but to the crowd, it was worthy of applause and praise.

“You won…” Max said with a chuckle, not concerned that his friend couldn’t hear him.

140 - A Tough Team Decision

[140 - A Tough Team Decision - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“You cheated?”

“Shhh… don’t tell Fowl!” Max exclaimed, watching his dwarven friend snore as he lay across Batrire’s lap, holding his trophy under his arm.

“Regeneration actually helped against the effect of alcohol?” Batrire whispered as she continued to stroke Fowl’s hair.

The carriage they had reserved for the trip home had been a godsend, as finding one after the competition was over would have easily taken an hour based on the line leading to the area where carts picked up their patrons.

“I tested it after the first two beers, knowing that if it didn’t, I was going to be out soon. I honestly didn’t expect it to help with the liquid I had already consumed. Where it went, I have no idea.”

Batrire snorted, shaking her head. “Had you won using that, Fowl would have been pretty upset.”

“There was no way I could have won that last part. I didn’t know the trick; it was all over once my breath was gone. What really makes me wonder is how that elf, Seujjana, seemed to have no problems with the amount of alcohol she drank. Is it possible for an elf to have a regeneration skill?”

Tanila frowned, her eyes gazing up at the carriage's ceiling. “I wouldn’t bet on that, as regeneration isn’t really a skill any of the three main races can get naturally. She may have had an item that helped, but risking someone finding out they had it… doesn’t seem worth it for a silly trophy.”

“And free ale for a year,” Fowl muttered, his voice slurred as he spoke. “Gods... Seth... you cheated... I take back the half-dwarf…”

The three of them chuckled as Fowl opened one eye for a moment before shutting it and holding his trophy tighter.

“I would have quit right before you did,” Max said. “There is no way I would stand between you and that helm.”

A grunt of acknowledgment came from Fowl as he shifted a little and started snoring again.

“Is he asleep?” Max whispered.

Batrire shrugged, stroking her man’s hair once again.

“Guess I'll keep my dwarf jokes to myself when he's sleeping near us from now on.”

“That’s cuz they’re not funny,” Fowl said before letting out a massive ten-second belch that left the other three holding their noses and trying to stick their heads out of the carriage.

“Finally. Been waiting on that since the cask.”

No one paid him any attention, trading the dank smell in the carriage for any scent the city could provide.

“So let me get this straight,” Tom said, shaking his head in disbelief at the party’s news. Are you actually ready to have a skill upgraded?”

“Tanila is going to upgrade one of her skills to epic. Everett said we could do that, right?” Max asked

Tom nodded as he frowned, looking at the four of them.

“Most don’t upgrade their mage first, but it’s not my place to tell you four how to spend your points if you got them. I’m here if you want help and advice, so I won’t lie, I’m surprised by the decision. I had anticipated Seth getting the first upgrade, but if you want, we can go ahead and get that taken care of.”

“Actually, can you see if Everett is free also? I have a question for him while Tanila does that.”

Max did his best to not shift under Tom’s gaze.

“Should I ask?”

“You can, but then I’d have to repeat myself, and I think both you and Everett are going to want a say in what I ask,” Max replied.

Grunting, Tom motioned for the two of them to follow him.

“I'm still surprised your dwarf warrior isn’t back on his feet yet. How much alcohol did he consume?” Tom asked as he led them through the main foyer of the faction house and toward the stairs that led to Everett’s room.

“I lost count, but the half of a cask he drank without taking a breath is what I think finally did him in, even if he threw most of it up.”

Tom’s laugh bounced off the walls, filling the room. “Any dwarf that drinks that much deserves a morning off.”

It had taken a few minutes to get to Everett’s office, and when they arrived, Tom made his request, and the attendant outside the Faction master’s office took Tanila to where the skill shard was kept.

Everett and Tom sat on the same couch, each looking at Max and waiting to hear whatever he thought was worth bringing them together on such short notice.

“Have you shared what we discussed a few days ago with Tom?”

Tom turned his attention to the man next to him, and Tom’s eyebrow, which was closest to Everett, was raised.

“I have not… I thought we had discussed keeping some things secret,” Everett replied, frowning at being put on the spot.

“I know, but this next part is something my group and I have been discussing. We feel we are coming to a point where we need to make a decision about it. We need to find a fifth-party member, and none of us know anyone who would work. We would trust your recommendation for that slot. Obviously, keeping our secrets needs to be high on the qualifications.”

Everett chuckled and then coughed when he heard Tom grunt.

“Why do I feel like I’m missing out on something?” Tom asked, looking between the two.

Leaning forward in his seat, Max pulled a cloak out of his storage and held it in his hand. “You can touch it but can’t take it because it's bound to me. Tell me your first thought, Tom.”

Tom and Everett reached out and touched the cloak, their eyes narrowing before going wide after feeling it. Tom stood up and moved closer, his eyes getting wider as he brought the cloak a foot from his face.

“Is this… spider silk?” Tom asked, his tone sounding like he almost didn’t believe his own words.

“It is.”

Looking over his shoulder at Everett, Tom mouthed something Max couldn’t see. No words had been spoken, or he would have easily heard them.

“It’s from a rare spawn on a rare dungeon floor,” Everett replied.

Max was afraid Tom’s neck was going to break from the speed at which his head snapped back to face him.

“You fought on a rare dungeon floor?!” he shouted. Realizing how loud he had been, Tom rubbed his eyes and groaned. “Do you have any idea how rare those are? I’ve only been in one myself, and I still have the item I got there.”

Max nodded and laughed. “I do understand they are rare… I still use the items I have received from my rare dungeon floors.”

Tom nodded in agreement, and then his head froze mid-motion, his face scrunching as he processed what Max had just said. “Are you saying–”

“Yes,” Max said with a sigh, interrupting Tom to save time. “Four… we have been in four.”

“HOLY GOBLIN NUTS!” Tom shouted, jumping to his feet and looking at Everett, who was smiling, before turning his attention back to Max. “How? When? What?”

“Tom, settle down… obviously Seth is going to tell you, and I expect this to not leave the three of us.”

“But… but…”

Tom groaned and nodded, returning to his seat before flopping down onto the padded chair. “Four… four Everett… before the tower…”

“Yes, the gods aren’t fair. Now, Seth, do you want to share the rest with him?”

Max nodded and leaned back, smiling at Tom, who was pouting like a child who had their candy taken from them.

Tom sat there in disbelief, not saying anything.

“With that said, Now I want to know the real reason you asked us both here,” Everett said, chuckling at Tom’s reaction.

“We need a fifth partner. Someone you trust and will also be privy to this and a few other things we don’t want getting out.”

Shaking off his shock, Tom looked at Max, opening his mouth for a moment before closing it again.

“I’m assuming these are things you haven’t shared with us yet, either?” Everett asked.

Nodding slowly, Max smirked. “Our group is very special, and after our last dungeon, it was evident that we need another teammate who understands discretion.”

Everett stood up and walked to his desk.

Tom crossed his arms and slowly shook his head at Max, rubbing his chin with each shake. “That’s why you’re having Tanila upgrade a skill—to hide your power.”

“That doesn’t sound like a question,” Max replied, grinning at the older man. “I’d like to believe that you think me and my team aren’t idiots.”

Chuckling, Tom shook his head and then sighed. “I’ve seen a lot of adventurers in my time, and your group was higher on the list of impressive teams than most the first time I met you all. That is even without Everett’s stamp of approval on you all. My real question, which I don’t expect an answer to, is what you all are hiding. I can tell Tanila and Batrire are stronger than one might expect from their class, and Fowl also has some advantages. Even then, I’ll reaffirm my previous statement. You are stronger than all of them. I really want to know how you are getting something any other team could only dream of… rare dungeons… Of course, they’re dangerous, but the items are beyond imagination until higher levels in the tower.”

“Which is why we go into all of them.”

Max hadn’t told them about the red portal that appeared when the massive dungeon break occurred. When they had determined this plan of action, Tanila made sure they understood that no one should know about it.

“Smart… dangerous, but smart. I’m assuming you have an idea of what class you four want for your fifth?”

Max nodded, watching Everett return to them with a book in his hand. After the Faction leader sat in his chair, he opened the book and frowned.

“So, what class are you thinking?” Tom asked, not waiting for Everett to chime in.

“A ranger or archer of some kind. Damage and survivability. We can handle a lot of creatures at once, but our biggest problem is depending on Tanila and myself for the damage. If we get overrun, handling things as effectively as we would like becomes difficult. After the city break last week and seeing what an archer could do in a group setting, we all knew it was time.”

Tom nodded, smiling slightly at Max’s plan.

“Do you have a racial preference?” Everett asked as he started flipping back and forth between a few pages. “Also, is there a timeframe for when you want this addition?”

“If you say they’re good, we’ll trust your judgment,” Max replied with a shrug. “We have to assume that you know your people, and it's better than some random person we found from the adventurers guild. Not that it’s easy to find a solo person at our level anymore.”

Everett nodded as he ran his finger down a page in his book. “Most aren’t that way unless they lost their team in a dungeon, and, in that case, most of the time… they aren’t always the same.”

Memories of how he had felt when Batrire was dying in his arms flashed through Max’s mind. Had Batrire died, he knew that their team would never have been the same.

I wouldn’t have been the same…

“I have two possible people, both elves, one male and one female. The problem is they are already level fifty and slowly progressing through the tower.”

Everett handed the book to Tom and pointed at what Max assumed were the names of the archers.

Tom frowned at the first and then shook his head at the second. “We’d have to break up one of those groups regardless of which way we go. Based on how I see the dynamics, I’m almost certain we would be better off adding her to their party.”

Max opened his mouth, running his tongue over his teeth. The way Tom had said that didn’t sit right with him.

“What’s wrong with the one?”

Everett sighed, took the book from Tom’s hand, and shut it. “You’re the leader, and your party reacts to the instructions you give without asking questions. The one we both don’t think would work likes to lead; sometimes, he can be a pain. Two bakers in the same kitchen can sometimes butt heads over how much sugar needs to be in the cookies.”

Max started laughing harder than Everett had expected. It took about thirty seconds before he stopped, wiping away the tear that had formed.

“Sorry, baker jokes always seem funnier to me,” Max replied. “I wanted to be one when I was younger.”

Everett continued, not concerned with Max’s explanation. “Our other choice would be best, but I want to talk with her before I share her name.”

“She’s in the tower as we speak. I’d expect her to return in a few days.” Tom added.

“That would be perfect. Now I just need to wait for Tanila unless you two have other questions.”

Both men looked at Max and then at each other before laughing.

“We have a list longer than your body,” Tom said between his laughter.

Max smiled and stood up. “Write them down. Perhaps I’ll answer a couple of them in time.”

Everett and Tom both rose. After the three shook hands and Max left the room, the other two flopped back into the chairs.

“Do you have any idea what those four are capable of?” Tom asked, watching as his lifelong friend sat there, tapping his finger on the book he was holding.

Everett shook his head and frowned. “No, but if what they have encountered so far is any sign of what is to come, they may be the group that makes it higher than any of our other teams… imagine if they actually get past the fifty-ninth floor.”

Everett started laughing and shook his head. “Slow down there… let’s see what happens when they get into the tower first. As for an archer, are you serious about her?”

Nodding, Everett closed his eyes and laid his head against the back of his chair.

“Tom, if I weren’t old and wore out, I would have signed up to go with them. Since I can’t, that leaves me trusting one of our most promising groups with someone, and she is the first that comes to mind.”

Grunting, Tom mimicked Everett’s posture. “She’s going to be intrigued, to say the least. Think she’ll be up for it?”

“When Seth tells her how many rare dungeons they have faced? She’ll offer to wash his clothes or more.”

Both men chuckled.

“She does like loot and shiny things,” Tom said with a sigh.

141 - Talina's Secrets

141 - Talina's Secrets - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“Okay, so are we going to try to burn down this jungle?” Fowl asked as they stood, staring at the thick trees and foliage leading to the dungeon.

“Tanila might be able to,” Max replied, winking at Tanila. “She’s the one with an epic skill now.”

“You two, stop that,” Batrire said, chiding both boys for their behavior.

“Thanks,” Tanila whispered to Batrire.

“Don’t think anything of it, sister. Now, when can I get that autograph like you promised?”

Tanila groaned as Fowl and Max started laughing.

“Three!” Fowl shouted.

“I got left!” Tanila yelled as Max moved toward the one on the right, halberd ready and in Stealth mode.

Max cut down his target while Tanila sent a shard of ice as big as he was into the ape charging from the left. It hit with such force and power that it forced the ape back, shattering its top half as it froze.

“HOLY ELF TITS!” Batrire shouted as they witnessed Tanila’s newly upgraded spell.

The last ape found itself cut down a few moments later.

“Are you sure we need a fifth?” Fowl asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “If Tanila can hit like that…”

“They're not at our level,” Tanila replied, ignoring Fowl’s praise. “Besides, we all know those didn’t pose the greatest challenge this dungeon can throw at us. Let’s not just give up on the plan we all agreed to just because I’m such a badarse now.”

Max chuckled when Tanila gave a slight bow after finishing speaking.

“Gods, what am I going to do with you three?” Batrire groaned. "It was bad enough with those two and their big heads; now I have to deal with an elf who is full of herself.”

“FIVE!”

Max cursed as two apes dropped behind Tanila and Batrire right after Fowl pulled another group of three.

“I’ve got them! Focus on the others!” Tanila shouted.

Ignoring the temptation to turn and try to help her, Max instead focused on the one closest to him.

Coming out of Stealth, he cut down the ape in a single blow. It amazed him how much had changed in the last few weeks.

Fowl banged his hammer against the shield of the one on his right while the one on his left charged and slammed into his shield.

The dwarven tank slid back about two feet but remained unaffected as the ape roared.

Max came at the one on the right, spinning to hack off both of its legs right below its hips.

He had chosen the move so he could see how Tanila and Batrire were doing, and Max almost tripped when he saw one ape impaled on a massive stone spike and the other frozen solid.

Moving to the last ape, Max cut through its neck and decapitated it, while Fowl killed the legless ape by repeatedly bashing it in the head.

“Maybe Fowl was right, and we don’t need a fifth,” Max said, inspecting the carnage from the beasts Tanila had taken out on her own. “I’m not sure I could win in a duel against you.”

“I doubt that,” Tanila said with a smirk. “Once you got close, I’d be done for. Besides, I’m pretty sure you’re smart enough to figure out how to beat me.”

Nodding, Max smiled and gave her a wink. “I’m pretty sure it would be an epic fight, to say the least, and we both would probably use everything we had.”

Fowl glanced back and forth at his two friends, casually discussing how they would fight each other.

“Sad when you’re not worthy of licking their feet,” Batrire teased Fowl as she patted him on the shoulder.

“Wait. I could have licked their feet?” Fowl asked.

Max groaned. “Ok, that made my stomach roil… the thought of Fowl licking feet.”

“Keep your kinks to yourself,” Tanila added as she glared at the dwarven tank.

Ignoring their concerns, he laughed and started walking further into the jungle.

“Let’s go people. We got a boss to kill.”

“What the hell is this?” Fowl asked as they stood outside the portal leading to the boss floor. “This isn’t possible.”

The others nodded, looking at the orange and purple portal that pulsed with a deep thrum.

“What… no, don’t even try arguing we don’t need to do this. Imagine if Everett or Tom were here,” Max said. “I don’t think we can tell them about this anytime soon.”

Tanila nodded. Max saw how she was grimacing as she stared at the portal.

“What’s wrong Tanila?”

Their elven mage shook her head as she saw them looking at her. They all looked concerned.

“It’s just me and my big brain trying to do the math behind something like this,” Tanila explained. “I won’t go into details, but the fact that we are staring at a rare boss floor scares me. Not because it is rare, but because of something else… the question of why we keep getting these.”

“Do you have an answer to that question?” Batrire asked, watching her friend and noticing the concern on her face.

“Yes and no. If what we all believe about Seth is right, then the real question we have to ask ourselves is, can someone track what is happening to him? If the other god doesn’t like Seth, is this somehow a way to identify the skill he has?”

Max winced at that possibility. “I’m not certain how that would work. I mean, how would this help a god track me?”

Tanila sighed and frowned. “I’m privy to things I could be killed for sharing, and yet, I'm going to trust you three now because if we add another party member, it will be difficult to find another chance to talk like this.”

She motioned to a spot on the ground. “Let’s sit and rest for a moment. This is going to take a bit.”

“There are more gods than the three gods that we all believe in,” Tanila said, watching the others nod slowly. “For our world, those are the ones who rule our homes. On the other worlds, it is someone different…”

“Like the worlds connected through portals and gates?” Fowl asked.

“Even more than those, but yes. A few gates can be opened to other worlds, but those are usually the ones in which our god has power. Ockrim has multiple worlds, as does Thuyja. I know this because my parents have talked about me or one of my siblings one day, perhaps, going to one of them and taking power there.”

“How is that–”

“Just wait, please,” Tanila asked as she cut off Max. “The battle between the elves, humans, and dwarves from long ago was caused by people coming through those portals. The truth is, the last I knew, the three gods here didn't actually want to fight. Our prayers and actions here make them stronger. Yet other gods sometimes involve themselves, for whatever reason, with a world controlled by a god or goddess they don’t like.”

“Like the one that has helped Seth,” Batrire said as Tanila stopped to take a drink.

Tanila nodded and looked at Max, who sat there trying to absorb everything she told them.

“All I know is, as we get stronger and accomplish more, eventually we will attract the attention of our gods. If, as we discussed, we get close to completing the tower, then, without a doubt, the gods will be able to tell someone is growing stronger. That can be good and bad… good because if we go to another world and conquer in their name, they will grant all sorts of perks and powers. One of my sisters… she…” Tanila shuddered and stopped talking, shaking her head as she looked down at her cup. “I have a sister who is actively trying to get stronger no matter the cost… she is a follower of Thuyja, but of the old ways.”

Tanila looked at Max and winced. “She would kill you in a heartbeat, not because of what you are or the power you have but because you are a human.”

Looking at Fowl and Batrire, Tanila sighed. “She might even kill you without hesitation. She believes our race should be the only one.”

Max let out a low whistle when he heard that a princess was out there killing humans and trying to get stronger.

“Wait… she’s a princess like you?” Max asked. “I mean, like you like you?”

Tanila nodded, knowing what Max was asking. “Yes, and she has no problem using the one she acquired. It is an ugly thing.”

“I’m sorry, but you haven’t told us what you two seem to be talking about,” Batrire said. “Is there something we need to know?”

Shaking her head, Tanila frowned. “Not here and not now, but yes… I have shared a few things with him I haven’t told you. I will–”

“No, don’t. Don’t share just because you think I want to know. It’s ok if you two have secrets, just like Fowl and I have secrets. “

Tanila smiled and nodded as Batrire smiled back.

“Anyways,” Fowl said in a long, drawn-out way. “So what does all that have to do with these portals and us?”

“The more portals we go in, the stronger we get, the more I’m worried we’ll be noticed by a god that doesn’t like us. It’s one thing to get noticed at the tower's higher levels. It’s totally different when you are in the tower's lower levels or not even in it. Our strength isn’t enough to possibly to discourage them from attacking us.”

Tanila leaned over and drew a picture of the tower in the dirt.

“My parents have completed to the lower sixties in the tower. To say they got there on their own is a lie, as my grandparents spent a great amount of money and power to give them the best partners to get them that high. Eventually, they realized the dangers of it, and my grandparents told them it would be fine if they stopped. If my dad wanted to, he could kill me in an instant, and there would be nothing I could do to stop it.”

Fowl gulped at that, glancing at Batrire and Max. “That powerful?”

“You’ll realize the difference the day we get into the tower, and those crystals Everett gave us can be used. Some say it's like a drug.”

They sat there in silence for a while, and then Fowl stood. “Well, who cares? I say we go kill this boss and get stronger. I mean, we can’t turn down a chance like this! A boss! A fricking rare boss!”

Max chuckled and nodded. “I hate to agree with Fowl. I’m up for doing it. Everett and Tom would kill us if they ever found out we passed up this chance.”

Tanila rubbed her face, groaning slightly.

“What’s wrong, hun?” Batrire asked.

“Just the thought of another elf in our party… being the only one right now makes me special.”

They all groaned when they noticed the smirk on Tanila's face, hidden partially by her hand.

"Well, at least Seth will still be special," Fowl said. "No one with a head that shiny can't be."

"Enough you three, it's time to get to work. Let's see what's inside this boss portal."

Max, Tanila, and Fowl all chuckled as Batrire bossed them around.

"Well, this reminds me of that cat boss we faced," Max said. "Only, this looks far worse."

Fowl nodded as he smacked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Suddenly, I feel the need for something stronger than water."

They all looked at the layout of the boss floor. Trees over three hundred feet tall grew in random positions throughout the room. It was hard to tell, but the boss's room appeared to be at least five hundred yards in diameter if they estimated the distance correctly to the boss that they could barely make out. Each tree trunk was over ten feet in diameter, and the first branches were easily fifty feet up.

The dirt floor almost seemed to glow as light from the sun, visible through the trees, reflected off it.

"Are we taking bets on how tall that thing really is?" Fowl asked.

Max shook his head as he stared at the boss sitting on the ground over two hundred yards away.

"Thirty feet? Maybe more?"

Looking over his shoulder again, Max tried to ignore the fact that there wasn't a portal to exit the dungeon.

Do not fear it… Consume it!

The voice was back, and it seemed giddy at the prospect of what was before him.

Quiet Bob!

An angry tone of displeasure flooded his mind and core.

Mocking me is not a wise choice. Remember, without me, you may find yourself without any skills…

142 -Battle of the Apes

142 -Battle of the Apes - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

What?! Is that a threat?

Laughter echoed inside his head.

Never forget, we are one. We will discuss this further, but I will not be treated as a joke! If you choose to do so, you will find the coming days dangerous.

“Seth?”

Blinking, Max saw that all three of his teammates were watching him. “I'm sorry… lost in conversation. We’ll talk later, but for now, let’s focus.”

Tanila started to open her mouth, and Max shook his head.

“Well, let’s say Seth is right,” Fowl said. “If that massive ape is thirty feet tall and uses trees like the cat boss did those pillars, we’ll have to protect our support team.”

“You two seem to forget, I have many more spells now, and the effects are much greater.”

“Oh, I’m not forgetting,” replied their tank. “The problem is how much damage that thing can take and whether we can keep it off you once you start blasting. I have no doubt it will be stronger than the spider we faced the other day.”

Studying the area, Max tried to come up with a good battle plan while ignoring the conversation he had just had with his skill. Where they had zoned in was a tiny, twenty-foot opening with no protection except the back wall of the dungeon floor. There was a small area with no trees where they were, but that wouldn’t help.

“Tom said the boss was smart. The apes we fought on the previous two floors were good with tactics, but we overpowered them. Even worse is something no one has pointed out yet.”

“Which is?” Fowl asked.

“There is no yellow line on the ground. You can’t aggro the boss from here.”

Fowl groaned loudly, and Batrire even muttered a curse.

“Which means we have to enter its territory to fight,” Tanila stated.

Nodding, Max motioned to where they were standing. “In some ways, this would be a great spot to defend, but without a way to bring it here, we have a problem. I could go in and try to lure it, but what if it doesn’t come out?”

“Like that vampire bunny boss thing,” Batrire said. “Ogre shite, this could be way worse than that fight.”

“I really need to invest points in intelligence,” Fowl muttered. “So what’s the plan?”

“We go in. You’re in front, I’ll try to stealth, but I doubt it will be that easy. Tanila is going to be our biggest strength and weakness.”

“Why am I the weakness?” their mage asked, frowning at Max’s statement.

“Fowl’s right,” Max replied. “If that thing gets on you, I’m not sure we can pull it off. It’s not going to go down in one or two hits from your spells, and we only get one taunt with Fowl’s ring.”

“So I shouldn’t piss it off… got it,” Talina said.

Max felt like they were walking into a trap as they slowly made their way through the trees toward the boss. It was facing their direction, massive red eyes staring at them through a snarl. Its jaws had four massive fangs sticking over its lips, two each from the top and bottom.

Massive pieces of plate armor lined its forearms, shoulders, and chest. Plate armor protected the front sides of each of its quads and shins.

“At least it doesn’t have a fifteen-foot-long sword,” Fowl muttered as they got within one hundred yards of the boss.

“Stop jinxing us,” Batrire growled. “Focus, you hairy little dwarf.”

Fowl grunted but didn’t reply. Everyone was amped up about what might happen in a moment.

“It’s not moving,” Tanila said as they closed within fifty yards. “What do we do?”

“I can toss a rock,” Fowl stated. “You’re call.”

“Wait… let’s see if we can get into its clearing. There is a small area without trees in the spot its waiting.”

Everyone agreed Max was right, and each gave a slight grunt of acknowledgment.

As they approached the clearing where the boss sat frozen like a statue, it jumped to its feet and pounded its hands against the ground while roaring, sending spittle their way and shaking the ground.

“Go!” Max shouted as he let Fowl take point. He had his shield out along with his halberd, unsure what would happen once the fight started.

The boss leaped into the trees, grabbed onto one of the branches above, and started climbing.

“What the–”

“Get to the middle!” Max yelled while staying close to Tanila and Batrire as they moved to the center of the clearing.

Another loud roar came from the treetops, and suddenly, dozens of other cries that responded to the boss’s echoed through the trees.

“Ogre shite! There are more apes!” Batrire yelled as they all began to turn and watch shapes start to come down the trees.

The boss had disappeared into the canopy above, and Max tried counting as apes like the ones they fought on the second level descended the foliage and branches up high.

“Ten.. no eleven… wait… fourteen.”

Max kept watching as apes began to climb down the trees faster than he would have imagined was possible.

“Tanila! Start taking them out! Fowl, protect her! Batrire, stay behind me!”

“SHITE! SHITE! SHITE!” Fowl cursed as he watched the brown tree trunks around them filled with over twenty apes, all coming at them with a speed that seemed impossible from above.

Hand over foot, they scampered down.

“Seth, protect me! I can cast a spell, but it’s going to take a bit! It’s my new area of effect!”

“How long?!”

“Twenty seconds!”

Max did the math in his head and realized that the first group would reach them in about ten seconds.

“Be ready to taunt, Fowl! We need to buy her time!”

Putting his shield in storage, Max counted down the time as the first dozen apes landed on the ground and began to charge.

Fowl was almost pressed against Tanila, and Batrire was beside her. Max was opposite from Fowl, keeping the two women between them.

Max began casting his fire nova when the apes hit the ground.

It’s not going to do enough damage to kill them, but I need to piss them off.

The pack of apes was two yards away when his spell went off. Fire rolled out in a wave around him, igniting fur and flesh.

Loud screeches and wailing, followed by pissed-off roars, came from the apes around him.

“HOLD THAT TAUNT!” Max shouted as they all started to rush right at him.

[Intimidation]

Max opened his mouth and roared.

A wave of oppression surged from him, and the apes who were about to pound him with their fists froze. Some turned to flee, their body still smoking and covered in flames, toward the trees the other group of apes were coming from.

Using the moment when more than half of the apes stood there in shock, Max planted his feet and swung his halberd in a wide arc. Two apes were cut down, while a third suffered a massive gash to its side.

A roar from the trees above sounded, seeming to awaken those who were startled and running.

One more ape near Max lost its head from a well-placed slash before the rest of the apes rushed towards them as one.

Twenty-seven apes came at them, some nearly upon Max as they had been closer, swinging their fists since not a single one carried a weapon.

He blocked and parried two hits while receiving a fist to his side.

“Now!” Max shouted, wincing at the strike that had landed.

The effect of Fowl’s taunt was evident the moment it went off. Every single ape’s hate-filled red eyes turned to look at the dwarf in his plate armor, then rushed him.

The dwarf had stepped forward, leaving Tanila a few yards behind as he did it.

A pile of apes jumped onto him, pounding with their fists. The sounds of flesh against metal filled the clearing as the first apes assaulted the dwarf.

Max cut down a few as they ran past him, keeping time in his head.

Three…. Two…. one…

The last few seconds seemed to last forever as a pile of bodies tried to flatten Fowl under their weight, each ape trying to tear the dwarf apart.

Tanila’s spell went off, and the fire that came from her made Max’s fire nova look like a candle compared to a bonfire.

Waves of heat came rolling out three times with flames that washed over the forest floor. They reached past the first row of trees and almost to the second, turning every ape within the spell's range into ash by the second wave of fire.

She was panting, leaning against her staff, while Batrire tossed Fowl a heal.

“Gods, what was that?” Fowl asked.

“New spell,” Tanila replied, after taking a deep breath. “It’s a big mana drain but… it’s strong.”

Max ignored the discussion, looking around to see if more apes were coming. All around them, the ground was smoking, and a few bits of foliage were gone, along with the bodies of all the creatures Tanila had just killed. Even the trunks of the trees were smoking, none having caught fully on fire as they weren’t dry or dying but simply burnt and covered with black soot.

“Where’s the boss?” Fowl asked, glancing towards the treetops.

Max didn’t hesitate, picking up Batrire and Tanila as he sprinted toward the edge of the clearing.

A huge branch came flying at them from above, slamming into the ground where both women had just been.

Fowl was sent tumbling face-first into the dirt as the smaller branches on the huge piece of wood the boss had thrown smacked into him.

“Now what?” Tanila asked as Max kept the two of them on his shoulders, his eyes trained up on the treetops.

“I’m not sure!” Max replied, running again as another huge tree limb fell in their direction.

Zigzagging around the trees as he ran, Max found himself boxed in by the incoming barrage of foliage the boss was sending down.

“Its blocking us in!” Tanila shouted after about the twentieth piece slammed into the ground near the base of the trunks.

Max saw Tanila was right. The boss had gladly followed them in their movements, sending down three and four foot wide branches that were enclosing the outer edge of the tree line.

“What do we do?!” Max asked as he raced toward an opening near him.

Two huge limbs came at them at once, one landing further into the trees and another behind them.

“Fowl?” Batrire called out, trying to ignore the jostling Max was putting her through as he continued to run, carrying her and Tanila.

“I’m fine! It doesn’t want me!”

“We can’t stay here!” Tanila shouted over the sounds of the tree limbs crashing down around them. “Can we get out?”

“No!” Max replied, pushing off of a tree with his leg to change direction as he moved back into the inner ring of the clearing where the boss had started. “It could toss branches from the trees at us even if we were near the entrance. We need to figure something out so it comes down and fights on our terms.”

Tanila looked at the clearing they were in and realized they were quickly running out of time. Only a few sections of trees didn’t have a branch blocking them, and in less than a minute, she doubted any opening would exist.

“The boss is boxing us in… it will probably attack us once it does.”

Max felt his blood turn cold as he surveyed the clearing. One limb lay in the middle, and with the blockade, the boss had already created, the space they had to work with was twenty yards at best.

“It’s creating a killing box…”

143 - Battle In the Trees

143 - Battle In the Trees - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“Can you dodge or protect yourselves if I set you down?” Max yelled as he moved back toward the middle of the clearing.

“I can make some air walls. They should hold!” Tanila replied, her voice going up and down as his shoulder rammed into her stomach as he ran.

“Be ready! Fowl, protect them!”

After Max quickly deposited the women at his feet while another limb crashed into one of the last three openings, he grabbed the log in the center of the clearing and heaved.

It lifted easier than he had thought. Ignoring the smaller branches that brushed against his face, Max took a step and tossed it as best as he could toward the side of the clearing. It flew, spinning twice before slamming into a tree and the limb the boss had already deposited.

“SHIELD!”

Max turned to see a limb aimed toward the three behind him. It bounced off the air wall Tanila had created, sending it into the trees and limbs to their left.

“It held!”

Just how much stronger are her spells now?

Max pulled an axe from his storage and ran to one of the limbs the boss had blocked them in, swinging downward with everything he had. The axe cleaved through the log, cutting it in half with ease. Putting the axe away, he pushed the two pieces apart, creating a gap between them.

A roar, followed by some chest-beating, came from above. Max spun and looked.

The foliage thinned out towards the inner part of the clearing, and Max could see the boss moving through the treetops, breaking off tiny branches as it jumped from tree to tree, trying to find larger branches that would work for its plan.

The trees were about twenty feet apart, and the boss would have to come down lower to find a branch worth using.

“Can you hit the boss with a spell when it comes down?” Max yelled as he ran back to where the others stood.

“Maybe. Right now, the distance is too great, and none of my spells have that kind of range yet. It’s close, but not there,” Tanila replied. “How long do you think it will stay up there?”

Another branch flew toward one of the last two openings, leaving just one more where Max had cut through.

Green leaves and small branches continued to rain down as the boss moved around above them.

“Max, go cut down that tree!” Tanila exclaimed as she pointed to one.

“I can’t! It may fall on us!”

“I’ll deal with that. Just cut it down. Trust me!”

Max moved without hesitation, taking the axe he had looted from the ogres back out.

He swung once, removing a three-foot section and causing the tree to groan. A massive log from above made it hard for Max to get into position. Cracks and groans came from the tree as Max repeatedly chopped at an impossible speed.

What a [Lumberjack] wouldn't give for this strength and axe...

There was a snap and crack, and Max jumped toward the clearing. A stone wall rose and pushed against the tree, pushing it toward the outer circle.

The tree began to fall, then crashed into the second ring of trees behind it.

"It's pissed!" Fowl shouted as he kept his head turned upward.

Looking up, Max saw the boss standing on a branch about two hundred and fifty yards and pounding its chest with one hand while holding onto the tree's trunk.

"Again!" Tanila shouted. "The one next to it!"

Max smiled and moved, his axe felling the tree in less than five chops and Tanila's stone wall pushing it to join the first one outside of the ring.

A crashing sound from above him made Max look up, to see another massive branch bouncing off an air shield and tumbling into the forest.

"Again!"

Five more trees went down, opening up a section of the treeline and cutting off the boss's ability to navigate around them easily. The falling trees had damaged many of the others, and it appeared the boss was now having to move lower, only two hundred feet above them, and struggling to break off the limbs it used to move around.

"It will be coming soon!" Tanila shouted. "Be ready!"

"What's the plan?" Fowl asked. "Besides not dying?"

"That's all I got for now," Tanila replied.

Max could see she wasn't as tired as earlier. With less death coming from above, she didn't have to cast an air wall as often.

"Over there, those three!" Tanila pointed to their right. "We'll box it in and force it to come down or back off to another ring of trees."

Running across the clearing, Max smiled as he looked at Batrire, who rolled her eyes.

"You two are breaking this, and I can only imagine what the dungeon must think about it."

We are breaking this... first the spider and now the boss floors. Could that be why we faced this so soon?

Trying to stay focused, Max had two more trees down and was working on the third when Fowl shouted.

"It's coming down!"

Racing back to the clearing, Max glanced up at the boss, who would have been blocked in if the third tree had been taken down. It would only have eleven trees to move around, and Max would take them down until it was stuck.

Now, it was almost within a hundred feet of them. As Max got closer to his team, he saw what it was going to do.

“Spread out! It’s jumping!”

Batrire and Fowl took off in one direction while Max raced in the same direction as Tanila.

Unlike the rest, Tanila slowly moved backward with a grin.

A horrible sound came from above, and Max looked up to see that the boss’s face had been impacted by an air wall about fifty feet from the ground, sending it falling backward.

It slammed into the ground on its back, bouncing once and shaking the ground from the impact.

Max was only a few yards from one of the boss's feet, so he planted his feet quickly and changed directions, swinging the axe he still held.

A one-foot-long gash appeared on the bottom of the creature’s foot, cutting into but not through the heavily calloused appendage.

The boss roared, and its foot lashed out toward Max, who tried to parry the attack with the axe and was sent tumbling in the process.

[Regeneration]

His broken arm began to shift back into place as he got up, wincing from the pain as the bones adjusted. The boss started to stand when a boulder appeared from nowhere and slammed into its face, sending its head crashing into the ground.

Max dropped the axe, pulled out his halberd, and held it in his left hand, waiting for his right arm to heal.

A green glow covered him and everything popped back into place as Batrire tossed him a heal.

Racing across the ten yards between him and the boss, Max saw a massive spear of ice fly from Tanila and impale the boss through its left armpit.

The ape roared, its left arm covered in ice while a massive hole thicker than Fowl began to crack as the boss moved its arm.

“Four more spells!” Tanila shouted. Max began casting his Fire Nova, knowing it wouldn’t do much damage, but any was better than none. Once Max arrived at the boss, he set his hips and slashed at the foot again, aiming for the same cut he had made before. His weapon skill placed the strike at the exact angle it needed to be, and he filleted the boss’s foot like a fisherman gutting a fish.

A huge gash, over a foot deep, opened up from the slash, and blood gushed as the boss cried out in pain.

Max rolled and stood up, dodging the kick he was expecting this time. His Fire Nova went off as he slashed his weapon into the boss's ankle.

It cut deep, another gash, hitting the bones and shattering them as fire licked at the boss's skin and hair.

"TWO MORE!"

Max had thought the smell of burnt flesh and hair was from his Fire Nova going off. He had missed seeing a fireball five times bigger than any he had witnessed before striking the boss's face.

Lightning surged through the boss as Tanila's spell impacted with its chest. The metal armor did nothing to stop the damage as it arced through it, causing the boss to tremble and shake.

Max could tell the boss was weakening because it was barely moving as Tanila unleashed power greater than he had ever imagined upon it.

He ran beside the boss, holding his halberd out and jabbing the blade into its side. As he ran, he sliced the side open, hearing the sound of its lungs struggling to breathe.

Suddenly, the boss's left hand fell from its arm as it reached towards him.

Max had sensed the spell, but there had been no visual effects he had just witnessed.

A goddamn invisible air spell?!

The boss's arm pulled back up, and as it did, an ice bolt as big as the last hit the same spot on its armpit, this time going deeper and causing the entire body on the left side to freeze.

"I'm out!" Tanila shouted.

Max could hear the exhaustion in her voice and knew the rest was up to him.

Jumping from the ground onto the boss's chest, Max almost winced at the sight before him. The ape's face was burnt beyond recognition, and two of its massive canines were gone, most likely shattered from either the wall of air or the boulder that had crushed it.

Blood was coming from its nose and mouth as it struggled to breathe.

Its right arm was raised but barely moving as it slowly approached him.

Running across its chest, Max prepared to end it.

[Power Strike]

His weapon glowed as he leaped at the boss's face, driving the spiked tip through the closed eyelid and into the boss's brain.

It shuddered for a moment before going still.

Cold power rushed through him, and Max held onto the weapon buried inside the boss as he jerked from the force that overwhelmed him.

[Bonus Consumed Stat]

[6 Strength Consumed]

[6 Constitution Consumed]

[6 Dexterity Consumed]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Skill does not match beings body type]

[Consume is adjusting skill]

[Would you like to learn [Rampage]?]

[Yes / No]

His eyes watered as his whole body felt the changes take place inside him. He blinked, trying to clear his vision as the cold effect faded, and realized that, for the first time ever, he had consumed three different stats at the same time.

Then, the skill seemed to beckon him to accept, but he needed a moment to recover first.

Panting, Max glanced at the creature beneath him, unsure of what he should do or try to harvest.

Tanila almost killed this thing on her own…

“Seth! Quickly, cut something off!”

Yanking his weapon free, Max saw the eyeball he had stabbed was worthless and glanced over to the other eye, storing his weapon as he did.

Pushing up the eyelid and holding it in place with his foot, Max thrust his hands into the socket and wrapped his arms around the eyeball. It came out, the long nerve attached to it dangling beneath.

He tossed it to the side and pulled out his knife to quickly sever the cord, then stored it all before turning to the rest of the body.

It was already starting to dissolve, and the only thing he saw close by was a fang jutting out from its upper lip.

Grabbing it in both hands and planting his feet on the boss’s jaw, he yanked, falling backward as the two-foot-long tooth came free. The boss’s head started to dissolve into the same glowing lights as always, causing Max to fall onto the ground on his back, holding his trophy.

“What did you get?” Fowl shouted.

Sitting up, Max saw the dwarf holding the hand that Tanila had cut off.

“Seems like yours is bigger than mine after all,” Max replied.

“Was there any doubt?” Fowl asked.

144 - What's In the Chest

144 - What's In the Chest - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“Put them away, boys. None of us want to see you comparing sizes,” Batrire groaned. She turned to Max, who was smiling, and cocked her head to the side. “You got something better than usual… your smile gives it away.”

Max chuckled and nodded, putting the tooth in storage while Fowl capped out the limits of his by putting in the massive hand that was bigger than him inside.

“Gods,” Fowl cursed. “Can’t I have a moment of joy before you go and ruin all my fun?”

The others laughed as they turned to look at the chest sitting on the burnt dirt in the middle of the clearing. It was massive, made of the same type of metal as the boss’s plate armor, and had a mural of the forest they had just fought in on it. The mural showed the boss they had just defeated standing in the middle of the trees, surrounded by dozens of smaller apes. On the mural were green gems for the tree tops.

“That’s a raid chest,” Tanila said with a sigh. “I guess we should be glad that our newest member isn’t here, or they might come to expect such luck.”

“Bah, you forgot to check your experience, didn’t you?” Fowl asked. We’re a little over halfway to level forty-five!”

Both women checked what Fowl said, and each grinned. Every day was bringing them closer to the tower.

“Ok, so do you want to check out the chest first or hear what I got from the boss?”

“Tell us what you got first,” Fowl replied. “I want to end this on a high note.”

Max nodded and smiled. “So a new message came up, and I guess the evolved version of Consume allows me to get more than just two different stats sometimes. This time–”

“Wait! What?” Fowl interrupted, his face looking like someone had punched him with the grimace he was wearing. “You got three?!”

“Quiet!” Batrire ordered. “If you’d shut up, we’d find out faster!”

Groaning, Fowl motioned with his hand for Max to go on.

“As I was saying, I ended up with three different stats… this thing was stronger, tougher, and faster than me, yet Tanila took it out like it was nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing. I didn’t have anything to finish it with. It took everything I had, and I still didn’t kill that thing.”

“Still, I don’t think I could have done that as easily… maybe if I blew all my abilities, but even then…” Max saw Fowl’s eyes bulging, obviously frustrated at Tanila and him going off on a tangent. “Regardless, I got six points each in strength, constitution, and dexterity.”

“Holy mother of elf tits!” Fowl groaned. “Eighteen points in one fight! It’s not fair, Ockrim, I swear!”

Batrire laughed at Fowl’s response but nodded in agreement. “That does seem unfair. Should I even ask what that brings you to?”

“Base stats or with everything?”

Rolling her eyes, Batrire shrugged. “Just tell me everything… I’d rather know what we are working with.”

[Status Check]

*****

Max Hoste

18-Year-old Human Male

Level 1

Exp 1/1000

HP: 1100/1100

MP: 560/560

Stamina: 550/550

STR: 107

DEX: 88

CON: 110

INT: 56

WIS: 48

Leather Boots - 1 DEX + 5% Speed Bonus while running

Black Quick Pants - 2 STR/DEX +10% Movement Bonus

Ogre’s Black Tunic - 3 STR/CON/DEX + 10% Magic Resist +10% Attack Damage

Black Bracers - 3 STR/CON +15% Damage decrease slashing/piercing

Belt of the Golem - 4 STR/CON +25% Damage decrease slashing/piercing

Scout Spider Helm - 5 STR/CON/DEX. Invisible State, Grants Minor Poison Resist

Cloak of Spider - 5 Dex. Spider Walk - 5 mins / 24 hour cooldown

Green Ring - 1 DEX

Black Rabbit Ring - 2 DEX

Ring of the Golem Prince - 4 CON +25% magic resist

Black Boss Band - 20% Stat Increase

*****

“Never mind, don’t tell me ever again,” Batrire stated after Max told them his stats.

Fowl was on his knees praying to Ockrim, promising everything if only he could be like Seth.

“I guess that means we should open the chest, right?” Tanila asked.

“We could, but should I accept the skill I got first and see what it does?”

“A SKILL? MOTHER OF OGRE NUTS!” Fowl shouted, shaking his fist at the sky. Max’s dwarven friend turned to look at him, and he saw a tear in his eye. “Tell me it’s something baking related…”

“Uh… not sure, but it’s called Rampage.”

Spitting on the ground, Fowl shook his head. “I'm Sorry, my love. Even if mine’s bigger, I can’t compete with that.”

Batrire chuckled, as did Fowl.

“Go ahead, I’m interested to hear what it does,” Tanila declared.

Max clicked yes. His body began to shake while his eyes closed tightly, a sensation of power and speed filling him.

[Skill Description - Rampage]

*****

Rampage - Rare Skill: Activating this ability grants the user three attacks in the time it takes for one normal attack. It may only be used with melee attacks. This ability has a twenty-four-hour cooldown.

*****

“Wow, that’s pretty nice,” Max said as he read the description. I can attack three times instead of once, but it has a twenty-four-hour cooldown.”

“That seems fair,” Fowl said as he rolled his eyes. “Anyway… let’s get to the chest. That way, the rest of us can feel like we are loved.”

Max shrugged and motioned to the chest that was waiting for them. “You want to open it?” he asked as he looked at Fowl.

“Damn right I do!” the dwarf replied as he moved to the chest and pushed the lid open.

Max tried to not chuckle, as the lip of the open chest was almost to Fowl’s armpits.

“Holy mother of Ockrim! He does love me!”

The three of them gathered together and moved to stand next to their suddenly excited dwarf, peering inside the chest to see what would cause him to react in such a way.

Four bottles of liquid, each almost as bright as the sun, rested inside the dimensional storage. Next to them were four black bands with the words “Prince Kong” on them.

“Prince Kong? What is up with all these titles?” Fowl asked, glancing at Tanila.

“Why are you asking me? And it better not be for the reason I think you are.”

Fowl bit his lip and said nothing, catching the glare that Tanila was giving him.

“What are the bottles?” Max asked.

“One of those in a tower is enough to kill someone over. Two would be considered worthy of a legend,” Tanila replied. “Four… I’m pretty certain I’ve never heard of four ever coming at once. Each bottle grants something random. Stats, experience, a skill even… they are worth…”

She glanced at the other two, who were both nodding.

“You could ask your queens for almost anything, and they would give it to you if they didn’t just kill you,” Fowl stated. “The real question is, who will drink theirs first?”

“Why don’t you go first?” Batrire said as she gave Fowl a gentle tap. “That way, if you die, we’ll know it was really poison.”

Fowl chuckled and grabbed one. He held the crystal vial in his hands, the light streaming between his fingers. It was dazzling and difficult to look at, but Max didn’t want to take his eyes off it.

Pulling out the crystal stopper, Fowl’s hands trembled slightly as he lifted the elixir to his lips and drank it quickly.

“Wow, that tasted like… my mother’s famous stew.”

Everyone watched Fowl, waiting to see what would happen.

“How long till it–”

Max stopped talking as Fowl became rigid, rising to his toes and jerking his arms to his side. His mouth flew open, and a ray of light shot out of it for a second.

“Gods, that was… holy elf tits!” Fowl exclaimed as he stared at what everyone knew must have been the notification.

“What did you get?!” Batrire asked, grabbing him by the shoulders.

“Twenty points in constitution, and my armored warrior just got upgraded to epic rank.”

“Holy elf tits, indeed!” Batrire cursed, shaking her head in shock.

“Wow, that’s pretty amazing!” Max exclaimed.

Fowl nodded, smacking his tongue. “I’m not certain that is supposed to happen, though. A skill upgrade and stats… I didn’t know they could do that. That taste in my mouth… it's so weird.”

“Batrire, you’re up,” Tanila said.

Giggling like a child, their healer reached into the chest and pulled out a vial, popping off the top and chugging it like Fowl had every tankard of ale.

A few seconds passed, and she suffered the same fate as Fowl, going rigid and shooting a ray of light from her mouth.

She panted, eyes wide like saucers, looking at her notifications.

“And…” Fowl said, motioning with his hands for her to start speaking.

“Twenty points into wisdom and a new skill,” Batrire said, her voice so low Max almost couldn’t hear her. “Protective Dome… I got Protective Dome at Uncommon rank…”

“SHITE! That’s awesome, baby!” Fowl shouted as he picked up Batrire and twirled her around.

She nodded, still looking at the notification in disbelief.

“You’re up, Tanila.”

Tanila smiled at Max and reached into the chest, pulling out her vial. After inspecting it for a moment, she looked up to Fowl, who was watching her anxiously and laughed.

“Fine, give me a moment,” she said, pulling the top off and drinking hers.

“Honeydew muffins… from the–”

Her words stopped as she went rigid, and light came from her mouth.

She took a moment, panting, and held up a hand to cut Fowl off before he started.

“Twenty in intelligence and I… I also got a new skill,” Tanila stated as she stared at her notification. “This shouldn’t be possible…”

Everyone looked at Tanila, watching the usually calm and level-headed elf stare in disbelief at her notifications.

The air around her grew cold, and Max could tell she was beginning to cast a spell. She moved her hands in the air, drawing a few runes inside a circle, and after thirty seconds, an orb of ice floated in the air next to her.

“What is that?” Max asked, moving closer to touch it.

“It’s an ice elemental familiar… it’s uh…”

Max reached out with a finger, slowly moving it toward the hovering orb. When he touched it, he ripped his finger back, wincing as it froze solid.

“Damn, that hurts!” he exclaimed, seeing that his finger was now a piece of ice.

Tanila, who hadn't been paying attention, looked in horror at Max’s finger as he winced and shook his hand. “I’m sorry! I should have warned you!” she said, moving her hands and dismissing the orb.

“It’s my fault. I should have known better than to touch without asking.”

Fowl chuckled, and Max groaned.

“This is going to suck. Sorry, but don’t look.” Taking a deep breath, Max made a fist, with one frozen finger sticking out past the rest, and swung it down into the edge of the chest. His frozen finger snapped off, and blood began to squirt from the open wound.

[Regeneration]

Slowly, before their eyes, the blood flow stopped, and a new finger began to form, stretching out until it was complete, fingernail and all.

[Regeneration Expired]

“That was freaky,” Fowl said with a grunt. “I still think we should try and–”

“Don’t say it!” Batrire growled.

“You’re up,” Tanila said, trying to move past what had just happened without any more discussion.

Max nodded and reached into the chest, pulling out the vial. Holding it in his hands, he could feel a warmth that made him feel calm.

Like Tanila, he stared at it for a few seconds until a grunt from Fowl broke him from his thoughts.

“You going to drink it or what?” Fowl asked, tapping his foot anxiously.

“I’m not certain I should,” Max replied, looking at all three of them for a moment. “I don’t need stats like you all do, and while I’m not certain what skill I might get or what upgrade might take place, as I stand here and think about it, one of you needs it more than me.”

Each of the three looked at Max in disbelief. Mouths were open slightly, eyebrows turned upward, faces drawn back.

“What are you saying?” Tanila asked. “You want one of us to have it instead of you? Do you realize what you–”

“I do,” Max said, stopping her from trying to dissuade him. “A while back, I made a mistake and drank an agility elixir. Looking back, I realized one of you should have gotten it. I don’t want to make that same mistake again.”

Each of the three looked at him, still struggling to comprehend what Max was about to do. Kings and queens would give titles and more for one of these elixirs, and their friend was about to give his away to one of them.

“I’ve been thinking about it since I saw what they could do,” Max said, a soft smile on his face. “This would serve the team better if I gave it to one of you. Besides, I already know who I’m giving it to.”

145 - Naming The Generations to Come

[145 - Naming The Generations to Come - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Fowl’s hand shook as he accepted the vial from Max.

“Are… are you certain?” Fowl asked, his voice shaking as much as his body was.

“I am,” Max replied with a smile. “Of course, I guess you think this is me being nice, but I’m just trying to help the team, and you’re the weakest one, obviously.”

Fowl saw Max wink at him and couldn’t help but laugh.

“Obviously… still… I’m not sure how I can ever repay you for this.”

“Oh, it’s simple. Just name your firstborn after me, even if it's a girl.”

Batrire choked, and Fowl started to chuckle.

“It’s a deal!” he exclaimed, ignoring Batrire's look. “I can see it now: Sethie, the dwarven warrior.”

Tanila laughed as Max shook his head in defeat.

“Maybe I should change my request…”

“No takebacks!” Fowl said as he popped the top and downed the potion.

After light poured from his mouth, Fowl stuttered for a moment.

“Batrire, my love…”

She narrowed her eyes and frowned as Fowl turned towards her, his face as white as a dwarves arse. “What?”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to name the first two children after him… I got two skills…”

“WHAT?”

Max started to laugh, and Tanila shook her head in disbelief.

“I got Thorned Defender and Taunting Aura… both are… clear skills…”

Batrire began to cough and turned to look at Tanila, who stared at the two of them, unable to comprehend the truth of what Fowl had just said.

“I’m sorry? Two clear skills? Is that possible?” Max asked, knowing they were both considered as strong as a red skill.

“No… it’s not,” Fowl said, his face still struggling to regain color. “One is worthy of a place within the king's guard… two would be…”
“Someone under the king,” Batrire finished. “Has there ever been a record of anyone receiving clear skills from one of these elixirs?”

Tanila shrugged as her dwarven friend stared at her. “No one really shares what they get, and most try to hide the fact that they even got the potion. Still… how is that possible?”

“It was his potion,” Fowl muttered, pointing at Max. “It wasn’t meant for me… had he taken it… what would he have received?”

All three stared at Max, and he shifted slightly under their gazes.

“What do you mean meant for me? Are you certain a specific elixir was meant for each of us?”

“They were listed under our loot. No one but you could have taken yours,” Tanila replied. “Batrire gained a skill that will be a major boon in the tower, heck, even outside it. Mine is… broken this early on. I gain a twenty-five percent bonus to damage with my spells and a twenty-five percent reduction in mana cost and cooldown…” She sighed and then shook her head.

“Seth, what makes it worse is that I don’t just have an ice familiar. I can choose which familiar I want from the elements and have it active. So if we are facing something that is weak to fire and I choose that familiar, I will be even more deadly. This is a rare skill gem drop in the thirty-plus tower range. Some *god* wanted us to be ready for the tower… and whatever they meant for you in that elixir would have been… broken.”

Rage and anger inside him came from his skill, knowing there was power he had passed up. Wincing, Max forced it down, choosing to focus on why he had done what he had.

“Do you think whoever made this happen knew I might give it away?” Max asked. “That if I choose that path, it would be rewarded to Fowl? Perhaps it wouldn’t have been anything special if I drank the elixir.”

“Who the goblin’s arse cares?” Fowl exclaimed, coming to where Max was and giving him a huge hug. “I’ll never be able to repay you, even if I name all twelve children Batrire is going to have after you.”

“Twelve? What the hell do you think I’m going to be doing that will allow me to have time for twelve kids?”

Max and Fowl laughed as Batrire glared at them, her face redder than Max’s old cloak.

“Let’s forget this for now,” Max said. “What’s done is done. We are stronger and need to finish these last five levels of experience. If we can accomplish that, Tom will help us prepare for the yeti and fire lizard dungeon.”

“Again,” Tanila pointed out, “The skill and chest rewards right before we go in… someone is watching, and that scares the heck out of me.”

“Seth’s right,” Fowl proclaimed as he leaned in and took his token for the boss. “We need to worry less about that. If we hurry, we can easily kill some trolls and get to level forty-five.”

“Trolls?!” Batrire shouted. “You want to just go jump into the troll dungeon?”

“Why not? She’s got a fire skill and an elemental familiar. Seth has fire spells and a crap ton of other broken things,” Fowl replied. “You’ve got a broken protective barrier, and I’m basically able to tank and taunt anything provided I have stamina, which, due to my current one hundred and thirty-three constitution, isn’t going to run out anytime soon.”

“Are we sure Fowl didn’t get some intelligence from one of those elixirs?” Max asked Tanila.

Fowl groaned and held up his middle finger at Max. “Bah, don’t think I won't talk back just because I owe you. Now, get your tokens, and let's go! I wanna test this stuff out!”

“This seems too easy,” Max said with a grimace. “I mean, I’m almost one-shotting them. Fowl is easily tanking their hits, and when Tanila fireballs them, it’s not even fair.”

Batrire muttered as she nodded. “Still… we’re traipsing through a swamp in a dungeon most people our level wouldn’t consider, especially without a full party.”

Max nodded and laughed as he stored the two clubs he had taken from the dead trolls. “Don’t forget to get those testicles!” Max called out as Fowl cursed and fumbled with the knife.

“I should have never said I owed you,” Fowl grumbled. “This is worse than you can imagine.”

“Oh, I can imagine it,” Max replied. “I’m seeing it and glad Batrire said we were trading naming of children for any harvesting I don’t want to do.”

Fowl cursed as a testicle dropped into the water, and he had to fish it out. “Damn plate gloves, can’t hold on to these slimy balls!”

“You could take your gloves off.”

Fowl shot Max a glare that could have turned him to stone.

“It looks about as normal as I could imagine,” Max said as they stared at the troll boss. “I guess the question is how good the experience is, and do you all want to

fight this and be locked out? There are other level forty-five dungeons. We would just need to travel to one of the other adventurers' halls."

"Let's leave it alive for now," Tanila replied. "Since we're all level forty-five, we can come here later if we need some quick experience. Besides, with your luck, I'd rather keep running this dungeon and see if the gods give us a rare one. It would be the easiest thing we could imagine so far."

Nodding, Max motioned to the blue portal behind them. "I guess the troll lives to see another day."

"Adventurers Seth, Tanila, Fowl, and Batrire, I have some wonderful news!" exclaimed the attendant, helping them with their trophies and tokens. "Here is the reward for defending the city the other day and a discount voucher for the potion shop. We know it isn't much for many, but if you need anything, please buy some potions from there."

They all nodded, smiling as Fowl pocketed the coin purse like a well-trained thief.

"One last bit of information," the female elf attendant said. She was looking at a few pages on her clipboard, flinging her blond braid over her shoulder. I have a note that once the four of you enter the tower, the hall master would like to discuss your future ranks within the hall. It appears you four could be A-Rank within another year!"

They all nodded, smiling as she informed them of the possible achievement.

"Anything else I can help you four with?"

"We're good, but thank you again," Fowl said.

She nodded, and the four left, leaving the counter space for another group to come in.

"A-Rank… this fast, that seems…"

"Like a bad thing," Max said, cutting off Batrire.

She nodded, and the four of them all shook their heads.

"I'd prefer not to get any more eyes on us than I somehow always manage to do," Max continued. "I'm just glad I didn't win that damn drinking contest!"

"Bah, you wanted my trophy, and don't deny it!"

Tom shook his head as he watched the four of them shifting under his gaze.

"Level forty-five…," he finally said after a moment. "It would appear you four are intent on reaching the tower sooner rather than later. Does this mean you are ready to attempt one of the level forty dungeons?"

"We would have gone in on our own had we not been committed to a Faction," Max replied. "After your warning, we decided it would be best to take you up on that

advice and help with the two dungeons. We were considering doing the yeti one first."

Frowning, Tom nodded as he made a few notes on a piece of paper. He leaned back in his chair, sitting behind a rarely used desk, and Max and the rest of the party stood on the opposite side, waiting for his advice.

"You can do things a few different ways, but I would prefer the first time without assistance from a magical item," Tom said as he crossed his arms, still reclining in his chair. "We can give you rings to help with the cold, but there is something to be said about experiencing those dungeons without aid. You may one day find yourself on a tower floor where the item you have doesn't provide as much assistance as you hoped for. When you're freezing off your extremities, you'll quickly learn to appreciate being prepared."

"How bad is it in there?" Fowl asked. "I've heard stories about some of the tower floors and the elements on them."

Laughing, Tom nodded and reached up with one hand to stroke his chin. He stared at the ceiling, apparently lost in a memory. "One time, we found out the floor had changed as we climbed upward. It was so cold that I wasn't sure I could get my item on in time. You don't realize how cold metal can get until it touches your bare skin and almost freezes to it. In combat, you sweat, even in the cold, and when that freezes, the cold wind blowing in places you don't want it to…"

Tom shivered and chuckled. "I need to stop scaring you four. The dungeon you are going to attempt isn't that bad compared to what I have faced. Tanila and Batrire, find some gloves, not magical ones that provide heat, but standard gloves. Get some warmer undergarments, and ensure you have a hood for your head. Likewise, invest in a good face covering. A cold mage or healer is bad when quick reactions are required."

Rising from his chair, Tom turned to Max and Fowl. "You two are going to have it worse. Talk with someone about a few layers of breathable undergarments. Something to catch the sweat but not bring it to the surface and allow it to freeze. Ensure your feet are warm, and a good head covering can go a long way in keeping your ears from freezing off." Tom tapped his nose a few times. "You could try to find a covering for your face as well, but since I doubt you will go past the first floor before deciding to come back to me, just be smart, and if your healer tells you it's time to go, don't argue. Your brain might freeze and cause you to do stupid stuff. Trust them."

Clapping his hands together, Tom grinned. "Now go have fun, and after your first time, come back and see me. Upon your return, I'll have items for you to make the dungeon much more manageable. Do you have any questions?"

"Yeah," Fowl replied, frowning at how excited Tom seemed. "What about the fire dungeon?"

Peals of laughter rolled out of Tom for a moment. "Don't worry about that just yet, Fowl. Let's deal with the woes of one thing at a time."

Grunting, Fowl shook his head. "Something tells me tomorrow I'm going to end up with blue balls…"

146 - Elemental Time

[146 - Elemental Time - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“We ready?” Max asked as the four of them finished putting on their gear. Max was sweating slightly from the layers of clothes he wore under his armor. He could feel a difference just standing inside the adventurers hall.

“Gods, yes,” groaned Fowl. “I feel like a steamed sausage in my armor right now.”

Tanila and Batrire nodded, moving quickly into the blue portal near them.

“Holy blue balls!” Fowl shouted, trying to make sure everyone heard him over the wind. “It’s a bit chilly in these nether areas!”

Everywhere around them was snow, up to their knees and still falling. The wind assaulted them, and the cold air found every bit of unprotected flesh, letting them know that Tom had been correct about how bad this would be. Snow swirled down on and around, leaving only a small area of visibility.

“I can’t see but maybe fifteen or twenty yards!” Tanila yelled. “Let me summon my familiar!”

Max nodded, wondering if the magic resistance from his armor was helping him not to feel cold or if it was something else.

A roaring ball of fire appeared next to Tanila, and Max saw her visibly sigh in relief.

“Stand next to it!” she told Batrire, who came and nodded that things were much better within the small area of its aura.

“Okay! I’m driving the piton! Batrire, you’re in charge of it first!”

Max pulled out the spike and the first of the many ropes they had purchased for this dungeon. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know how much rope adventurers lost. Tom had given them a list of equipment and some instructions for this zone, and not getting lost was high on the list.

He tied the rope's end to the spike and handed Batrire the rope pouch. How it worked still amazed him, but supposedly, over two miles' worth of rope would continue to let itself out as they walked.

“Ready here!”

Batrire cast her buff and gave a thumbs up.

“Lead on Fowl!” Max shouted as he motioned to his dwarven tank.

The dwarf's curses as he moved through the thick snow were drowned out by the wind.

The wind affected Max’s sonar skill, creating an almost painful throbbing in his head. The range had actually shrunk, and he could barely make out his friends in the area it detected.

“TWO!”

Max and Fowl fought the first two yetis. They had stumbled upon them, not realizing they were there until the red eyes appeared, charging at them.

They were covered in white fur and had massive claws on the tips of their fingers. Huge fangs jutted from their mouth. They had blue-skinned faces, and the white coat of fur that covered them from head to toe completely hid their presence until they attacked.

Fowl blocked the first yeti’s attack with his shield, causing the creature to roar in agony and anger. Max stood off to the side, ready to back up Fowl if needed, but they wanted to see how Fowl managed against two from the start.

They slashed and clawed at the dwarven tank, doing no damage to him as their claws couldn’t penetrate his defenses, and Max saw that after a minute they were bleeding slightly. Fowl's new skill reflected small amounts of damage back at them.

The yetis could heal themselves, so Fowl’s skill did little besides make them hate him more.

As their tank easily defended and landed blows against the eight-foot-tall creatures, Max knew it was time for Plan B.

“Light one up!” Max shouted, motioning to Tanila.

A standard fireball appeared beside her, yet Max could tell it was stronger than his. It flew to where both yeti were and exploded, turning them into smoldering yeti flesh corpses.

“I wasn’t done yet!” Fowl shouted, glancing at the burnt corpses at his feet.

“That was a normal fireball!” Tanila replied. “I wasn’t trying to go all out!”

Shaking his head, Max looked back at their mage, trying to imagine what one of his spells would do compared to hers. The amount of damage she had just done reminded him of when he had slaughtered the dungeon monsters for Aimee and her father.

“We should be fine!” Max shouted, chuckling at Tanila's appearance and almost embarrassed by what she had done. “Let’s keep moving, clear what we can, and leave!”

The hours it took to sweep a massive dungeon section were long and tiring. Max cast his Fire Nova multiple times around the group, melting snow and creating a moment of warmth.

Max and the rest quickly broke into a jog when the portal appeared ahead.

The second dungeon floor greeted them with even more wind and snow, making them shiver the moment they appeared on it.

“Let’s get out of here!” Fowl yelled. “My nuts are in hibernation mode!”

No one felt the need to reply as they all moved to the nearby portal and exit to the dungeon.

“Gods, that was miserable,” Fowl muttered, his teeth clacking against each other as he shivered. “How did they ever beat those dungeons in the beginning?”

Max shook his head, shivering from the cold while watching Tanila and Batrire do the same. “Tom didn’t do a bad job warning us, but I guess he knew the second floor would be too much without magical assistance. How much rope did we use?”

Batrire slapped her hands against her arms a few times and then took the pouch from her belt. Opening it, she shook her head. “We used over half… was the floor that long, or were we not moving in a straight line?”

“Probably the latter,” Tanila replied. “These dungeons are worse because you can’t keep track of your direction unless you have someone gifted with that ability. Typically, a miner would have those skills, but I guess an adventurer could also have them.”

“It's probably a scout skill,” Max said. “Who knows? I’m just glad we’re out of there.”

“First, are we going to visit Tom or return to the inn?” Tanila asked.

“I say we visit Tom, pick up the items he has for us, and then go back to the inn,” Max answered. “I’d rather just rest and be done for the day then hit this again tomorrow morning.”

Batrire and Fowl nodded as Batrire began to help Fowl take off his armor.

“I have a question,” Max asked as they rode in the back of their rented carriage. “Just how much damage are you doing with your fireball against those yetis?”

Tanila clicked her tongue a few times, gazing up at the carriage ceiling as she tried to figure out the numbers.

“So, let’s say my intelligence is almost three times as high as yours… then with the twenty-five percent increase in damage from my new skill and the increased damage yetis take from fire, I’m basically broken in that dungeon… almost as bad as in the troll one, but not quite.”

“Why do I feel like the third wheel?” Fowl whispered to Batrire, not trying to be quiet.

“You’re not the third wheel,” Batrire replied with a grin. “You’re the fourth.”

Sighing, Fowl nodded and winked at Tanila sitting across from him. “Don’t worry, I’m just messing around. It was bad enough getting outclassed by our resident bald guy. Now I have this elven mage lighting things up like a birthday cake for a two-hundred-year-old dwarf.”

Max and Tanila both started laughing.

“Don’t worry. We will need you more than you realize once we hit the level fifty dungeon. I know some people choose not to do them, but the rewards are well worth it if we go before going inside the tower.”

“What are the rewards?” Max asked Tanila, not having considered doing any more dungeons once they were high enough to enter the tower.

“Yeah, why didn’t Tom tell us to do them?” Fowl asked before Tanila could answer.

“Because they're hard, like really hard,” she answered. “Most people don’t do them because it's too late by the time they can.”

“Which brings me back to what are the rewards?” Fowl grumbled.

Rolling her eyes, Tanila held her hand up in Fowl’s face. “Just let me finish, and I’ll tell you!” she exclaimed. “There are only two here in this city and two in each of the others. All are basically the same. You only get one chance to enter; if you leave, that’s it. No other chance. Not even in the other cities. The first dungeon is filled with demons and other things that haunt most people's nightmares. Magic isn’t effective against some, and others are immune to basic weapons, not that anyone would be using those there.”

Max grinned as Tanila took a breath. “Imagine not having magical weapons stored in your backpack… stuff like, say, axes and clubs.”

Max ignored Fowl’s comment and waited for Tanila to continue.

“Anyways… they use dark magic, curses, life drain abilities, and more. Fear is common, and the boss is typically not easy to beat, even for a well-equipped standard five-person group. That said, the demon dungeon is often considered the easier of the two,” Tanila stated. “The other dungeon is full of lizards and drakes, culminating in a battle with a smaller dragon-like drake. It’s not a full dragon, but similar in enough ways that most won't risk it. Imagine getting fire, ice, lightning, or another element blasted at you.”

Fowl was rocking back and forth glaring at Tanila, who smiled, knowing what he was waiting for.

“The part our tiny warrior wants to know is that first, no items are given for defeating those dungeons.”

“WHAT? No loot?! That sucks!” Fowl began to shout and complain. “Why in the gods would someone–”

“JUST WAIT!” Tanila yelled, cutting Fowl’s tirade off. “I’m getting there. Can you wait for just a single moment?”

Fowl covered his mouth with his hand, and his cheeks looked slightly red as if he was momentarily embarrassed.

“As I was saying,” Tanila continued, “there is no loot, but there are bonuses to the people who actually beat the dungeon. At the center will be an item you can touch once the boss is defeated, and it grants the adventurer half of a percent of resistance per tower level they complete, the type depending on the dungeon they beat. The dragon is physical, and the demon one is magical.”

Fowl and Max both let out a low whistle.

“That would add up at the higher parts of the tower,” Max pointed out. “Why don’t they have tower climbers helping with those bosses and dungeons?”

Smiling as she shook her head, Tanila put her hand out to stop Fowl’s incoming question. “The dungeon knows. If anyone, and I mean anyone who has been in the tower, joins the group and enters it, no one will get any rewards. Even if the tower climber helps clear to the boss and doesn’t go further. It was very painful for those who learned about this the hard way. You are getting the benefits of a lifetime of knowledge that most don’t have or won’t share.

“That is why I don’t think Tom or Everett have mentioned it to us,” she continued. “We all know they are excited about the four of us and what we might bring to their Faction. Losing us would be a major blow to their potential growth, especially if we continue to excel at finding rare spawns.”

“Damn, she’s smart,” Batrire stated. “Perhaps Tanila can spare a few intelligence points for our warrior.”

“Hey, leave me out of this,” Fowl complained. “It’s not my fault I grew up near a forge.”

Max ignored the other three as they continued to tease and joke with each other, considering what he had just heard.

“Seth?”

Max nodded, acknowledging Fowl’s calling of his name.

“What are you thinking? That grin on your face tells me we’ll probably attempt at least one.”

Max nodded. “I think we need to get back to Tom, pick up our gear for the yeti dungeon, and clear it. After that, we can do the fire salamander one and then go clear the troll dungeon and any other dungeons we can until you all hit level fifty. After that… we clear those last two dungeons.”

147 - Dwarves on Ice

147 - Dwarves on Ice - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“This feels so easy,” Fowl muttered as he moved quickly through the snow. “It’s almost as if it’s just windy now.”

Max and the others nodded in agreement.

Tom had the rings ready for them, only slightly surprised that they had actually found the portal to the second level. He had given them three pouches of rope and wished them luck taking out the yeti boss.

“Are we going to go fast or take it slow?” Max asked as they moved through the swirling snow. The ring he wore helped slightly with his sonar skill. The range was still shorter, but the noise in his head was gone.

“Let’s burn everything down,” Batrire said with an evil cackle. “I’m ready to get level fifty!”

Fowl pumped his fist into the air, excited at Batrire’s words.

“It looks like it’s your turn to carry us,” Max informed Tanila. “Try to make it look difficult, at least.”

They had used almost an entire rope pouch before they found the portal to the second level again.

Tanila was the new hero of the party. Her fire spell, combined with her familiar, allowed her to one-shot the yetis with ease.

“It seems chilly now but not as cold as last time,” Fowl grumbled. “At least my balls won’t be blue this run through.”

Max groaned and ignored the chuckle from his dwarven tank. “Be ready! We'll do things the same as before, but if the yetis are at a higher level or a bit tougher, I'll be ready to defend Tanila if needed.”

Driving a spike and attaching rope from a new bag, they set off into the slightly thicker snow, creating trails quickly covered by the downpour of white powder.

“FOUR!”

Fowl did his best to manage the beasts, ensuring he attracted all their attention. He could easily keep these locked down if they got to him before anyone else aggroed them. Their dwarven warrior’s new auras were almost impossible to believe, and Max often wondered what might have been had he drunk the elixir.

“Casting!”

Tanila’s fireball flew over the snow-covered ground and impacted into the second yeti from the right. The one she hit and the one next to it died in a flaming pile, like every yeti before, while one in the middle was caught in the blast. It roared as its flesh and hair burned, trying to get past Fowl and at the caster who had just rendered it bald.

Max didn’t waste any time, swinging his weapon and cleaving the yeti in two. A few seconds later, the last yeti was down, its blood staining the snow until it was covered up by the never-ending storm.

“Doesn’t look like I can kill three at once unless they are really close!” Tanila shouted. “What do you want to do?”

“Keep doing what we just did. That wasn’t bad, and until we can’t one-shot these, we will stick to the plan.”

“Says the guy with a strength of over a hundred,” Fowl muttered. While he spoke quietly, Max’s sonar skill had picked it up, even over the storm.

“Someday, you’ll be as strong as me,” Max teased.

“I doubt that!” Fowl shot back before heading off into the snow.

After two hours of searching, the boss portal came into view on their last bag of rope. The four of them didn’t hesitate as they ran into the portal.

The sound of silence filled their ears, surprising them all.

Surrounding the boss's room was a sheet of ice enclosing a massive two-hundred-yard area. A low ceiling with massive ice stalactites hovered only forty feet above their heads. In the middle of the room was a yeti, fifteen feet tall, with fur that was almost blue.

“Did you find out its skills?” Fowl shouted.

“Shhh… you don’t have to yell!” Batrire replied, yelling herself without realizing it.

They all started to laugh, realizing their hearing was off after the constant wind that had assaulted their ears.

“What’s the plan?” Tanila asked, doing her best to not shout.

“You’re going to smoke it in one or two shots,” Max said. “It has an ice blast, which I doubt I could consume, and it’s way weaker than any other boss we have faced. Even if I kill it, I’m not sure there is anything I would get from it.”

Fowl raised an eyebrow as he listened to Max talk. “Wait, you’re telling us you don’t want the kill?”

“If I get it, great. I’d rather see what Tanila can do against that thing with her new fireball spell.”

“Well, I’ll go aggro it, and she can kill it. After that, we'll hit the fire salamander dungeon.”

Max nodded at Fowl, and after Batrire gave him a thumbs-up, they all chuckled, watching as Fowl slid across the ice in his plate boots.

“What the hell is this? Dwarves on ice?”

“That’s a show I’d pay to see,” Max said with a laugh after Fowl fell on his backside.

“How am I supposed to move?” Fowl asked. “Did Tom intentionally not tell us about this?”

“Probably,” Batrire replied. “Tanila, can you help Fowl get across?”

Max chuckled as he moved up behind Fowl, helping his struggling, plate-wearing, dwarven friend to his feet. “I got an idea, but you might not like it.”

Fowl tried to turn to look back at Max but was struggling to just stay upright. “Why does that sound bad?”

“Because it is,” Max said. “Now put your shield on the ice and hold on. I want you to lie down on it and hold it from the side.”

“WHAT?!” roared Fowl. “You want me to lay my shield on the ice and climb onto it?”

“Lie on it, half on and half off. I’ll push you toward the boss. From there, Tanila can move up behind. Her boots seem to be doing much better than yours.”

“Goblin shite,” Fowl cursed, finally turning his head around and seeing that Max was completely serious. “I swear, if I die, I’m going to haunt you.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” Max said, waiting for Fowl to get on the shield.

It took a moment for their dwarf to figure out how to hold his curved shield so that it allowed him to stabilize himself on the slick surface.

“Ready?”

“Gods, no, I’m not ready,” Fowl shouted.

Laughing, Max took his weapon and used the tip to chip the floor, creating a divot behind Fowl. He grabbed his dwarven friend's hips while setting his foot in the small hole he had created.

“Here goes! Dwarven ice bowling!” Max shouted as he thrust his friend in the direction of the boss.

It seemed to be working until Fowl started to turn, his body rotating as he careened toward the boss.

“Crap, we got to go help him,” Batrire groaned.

Tanila and Batrire scooted across the ice as quickly as they could, each moving with an almost surreal grace.

“It’s like sliding,” Tanila said as she shifted her weight back and forth, pushing herself across the slick surface.

Max saw what she was doing and tried to copy her. His chain boots did not work nearly as well as Tanila’s leather boots.

They heard a roar, and the three saw Fowl was over seventy yards ahead of them, sliding across the ice with the boss charging at him.

“OGRE SHIIIIIITEE!” Fowl shouted as he held onto his shield, rolling onto his back as the boss attacked.

The yeti had no problem moving across the surface. Its claws on its toes and the skin on the bottom of its feet kept it upright and moving with amazing speed.

It reached Fowl and slammed a fist into him, hitting his shield and sending the dwarf sliding back and slightly away from the group.

“This is my fault!” Max shouted.

“YES IT IS!” Fowl yelled back, his words echoing around the ice cavern.

“I’m still out of range!” Tanila said. “I also need it to stay in one place when I cast!”

As Fowl spun around, getting closer to the edge of the floor, the yeti was racing toward him, and Max decided to try something new.

[Spider Walk]

He almost tripped as his boots grabbed the surface of the ice without any slip. As he moved, his chain boots released their grip as he needed them to and immediately secured themselves the second they touched the ground.

“I’m coming!” Max shouted as he took off at a full sprint, no longer struggling with the ice floor.

The boss reached Fowl, who was just starting to rise as he used the wall for support. As he got to his feet, the boss kicked him, sending the dwarf sliding along the ice again while spinning like a top.

Max was almost to the boss when it took off after the Fowl, who seemed to be hurting it every time it struck him.

“I’m going to puke,” Fowl called out after he slammed into the wall again.

Max saw where Tanila was trying to go and changed his angle slightly.

“I’ll aggro the boss! You prepare to hit it!”

Fire began to grow around their mage as Max raced after the boss, changing his pursuit angle to intercept the yeti before it could attack Fowl again.

They almost collided when Max came up on the left side of the boss, swinging his halberd and burying it deep within its leg. The boss howled in pain and immediately turned to face Max, ignoring the dwarven top it had been playing with.

Max parried a slash from the boss’s claws without getting knocked back as Fowl had.

It struck again, bringing both claws at the man who had made it difficult for the creature to walk or move.

“CASTING!”

Max parried both attacks, keeping the boss where Tanila was aiming, and felt the fireball enter his Sonar sphere from behind.

The boss staggered backward as its body was consumed by fire, the smell of burnt hair and flesh filling Max’s nostrils. It tried to roar, but the fire immediately burned its lungs and throat. It was dying, and in pain, so Max did what he could to help send it on its way.

Swinging his weapon, he hit the same as before on the left leg, cutting through and causing the boss to fall to the ice floor, still on fire as the magical energy burned the flesh that was exposed when the previous layer burned away.

It rolled on the ground in agony, and Max moved to its head. A single strike to its skull sent the halberd tip into its brain, killing the boss.

[5 Wisdom Consumed]

Max felt the rush of cold, signaling his mind trying to adjust to the sudden growth. It vanished after a few seconds, and he turned to see Fowl had made a mess on the floor.

“Gods, someone help me!” Fowl groaned, wiping the vomit from his helm and mouth.

“I’m not kissing that,” Batrire shouted as she slid to a stop.

“Don’t move, I’ll rescue you!” Max called out as he moved toward his sickly dwarven friend.

“One day, I’ll pay you back for that crazy idea,” Fowl moaned. “Who the hell thinks it's okay to slide a dwarf across ice?”

Chuckling, Max lifted his friend to his feet and carefully slid him toward the chest that had appeared at the center of the boss floor.

“Stop your complaining, and I’ll let you open the chest,” Max teased.

“Maybe I’ll vomit on you if I don’t,” their dwarf said with a slight gag. “It’s hard to describe how bad that really was.”

Max just smiled, and a devilish grin appeared. “How would you like to try that again?”

“Don’t you daaarre!”

Tanila and Batrire joined Max as Fowl on ice returned for a second show.

148 - Dealing With Drama

148 - Dealing With Drama - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“I swear that was the funniest thing I have ever seen,” Tanila said, chuckling as Fowl held his finger up at the three of them again. “The way you moved was so graceful.”

“You all keep laughing,” Fowl muttered as he lifted the lid to the chest made of ice that had appeared. “I’ll be pissing in your waterskins when you all aren’t looking!”

Batrire groaned. “Don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you tonight, my love. Now, stop your foolishness and tell me what’s inside.”

“It’s trash,” Fowl grumbled. “It's four rings, four tokens, and no random stuff, either.”

Max glanced into the dimensional storage's swirling portal and saw the rings inside.

“They look just like the ones Tom gave us,” Max pointed out, removing his chained glove and holding up his hand.

“I may not be a smart dwarf,” Fowl stated, “But I know what a magical ice ring looks like.”

They pulled their ring out and nodded, as it was already identified.

[Identify Ring]

*****

Ring of Cold Resistance

- 40% Resistance to cold effects. Does not reduce damage from cold attacks.

*****

“I guess the Faction just shares them?” Max asked. “Makes me wonder what other items are required for the tower floors.”

“Who cares?” Fowl grumbled, still pouting. “Let’s get the loot and blow this frozen treat stand.”

“Man, my balls are sweating,” Fowl stated. “How did we go from so cold to so hot?”

“That’s why they call it the fire dungeon,” Batrire replied, frustration seeping through her tone.

“What’s wrong with Fowl?” Max whispered to Tanila. “He’s been moody lately.”

“It’s the date,” Tanila replied quietly. “It’s his birthday next week, and it's a big one for his race. Not having his family…”

Max stared at Fowl and saw his friend was looking flustered, but not just because of the massive heat waves pouring over them. He was sweating from head to toe.

Max felt the same frustration of the heat as sweat ran from the top of his bald head down his neck and back.

Looking around the dungeon at the wave of heat rising off of the black rock and the rivers of lava that snaked through it, Max wondered what the boss room was going to be like.

“At least we can see farther than inside the ice dungeon, but the path is going to be dangerous. Some areas only have a few feet of stone between the lava flows.”

“And don’t forget,” Tanila added as Max continued looking around the floor, “the lizards hide in the lava. Everything about this place is designed to damage you with fire.”

Max nodded and pointed at the ice familiar floating in the air next to her. “I can feel the cold from that… it’s not a lot, but it does help some.”

She nodded and grinned. “Perks of being a friend of the god's favorite adventurer.”

“Are you two done flirting?” Fowl snapped. “I’d like to finish this floor as soon as possible.”

“Ready here!” Max replied, doing his best to not upset Fowl more.

The dwarf grunted and started making his way along the rocky floor, avoiding the holes and sharp edges of the black stone.

“HEAL ME!” Fowl shouted as Tanila sent an ice spear into the fire salamander’s head, killing it. Steam came from the wound she had created while Fowl moved his glowing metal vambraces next to the ice still sticking out of the corpse.

“I’m on it!” Batrire snapped back, her frustration at Fowl's attitude reaching a boiling point. “I haven’t let you die yet, so stop acting like I’m about to!”

Groaning, Fowl was covered in a green light as her spell went off. His metal vambraces began to return to their normal color. “I’m sorry, my skin was melting to the–”

“Enough!” Max shouted, his voice louder than he had expected. “We’re done. We can visit Tom tomorrow and get the rings to help here, but you two will not act like this!”

Fowl started to open his mouth, but Max cut him off. “Don’t! We’re friends, and I think of you like the brother I wish was acting like the man I know he is. I’m unsure what is happening, but I won’t stand by and watch this anymore. If I have to, I’ll pick your grumpy dwarf arse up, run you to the portal and throw you out myself. Now let’s go!”

Fowl glared at Max and then at Batrire, who was biting her lip even as she frowned.

“Fine,” Fowl replied. He stomped off, moving toward the entrance, his boots slamming against the stone.

Batrire started to speak, but Max just shook his head.

“Talk to me,” Max said. “We’re friends, and I know something is going on with you.”

The short dwarf grunted, keeping his eyes focused on the path he was taking to the portal. Tanila and Batrire were giving them a little space while Max tried to defuse the situation.

“It’s nothing,” Fowl finally stated in a gruff tone. “Dwarf stuff, you wouldn’t understand!”

Max took a deep breath, then wished he hadn’t, as the awful taste and heat of the air filled his lungs and tickled his throat. “Listen, bud, we’re your family. I know a little bit, but I don’t want to intrude too much. I trust you with the others and my life. You know my secrets. If you feel that’s not enough for you to be willing to share what's going on, then I’m not sure what else I can do to prove what you mean to me.”

Fowl’s plate boot caught on a jagged edge of the rock, and he stumbled. Max reached out and grabbed his friend's shoulder, keeping him upright.

A minute passed before Fowl finally turned his head toward Max. A few tears appeared, then were gone a second later, stolen by the heat of the dungeon. “I’m turning fifty,” Fowl grunted, “in four days. For dwarves, it’s one of the biggest birthdays there is before one hundred. Normally, it’s spent with one's family, leading to a huge celebration…” Fowl paused, choked up by what he was saying. “I can’t imagine what my parents are going through with me not being there. It’s hard enough for me to be away. Someday, I hope… no, I plan on returning home and them welcoming me back instead of feeling the shame of when I ran away.

Max's memories of his parents, along with what Caleb had said about how his mom, dad, and sister were doing, tugged at his heart. He felt the pain of being unable to return home and not knowing if they were safe and doing well.

"Four days… I'm not sure that's enough time…"

Fowl raised an eyebrow, glancing at Max before turning his attention to the ground he was about to trip on again. "For what?"

"To plan the greatest birthday party Alexander has ever thrown. I need to make sure my brother gets the celebration he deserves."

Stopping, Fowl turned and grabbed Max's arm. "You would do that?"

Nodding, Max put his other hand on Fowl's shoulder and smiled. "You're the closest thing I have to a family now. I understand the pain of not going home. If a party to celebrate your life and who you are is all I can do, let me make it the best one a human can come up with!"

Fowl reached up and took off his helm, finally allowing his face to be fully seen. The dwarf's chin was shaking, making his beard bounce up and down slightly. His big brown eyes throbbed from the emotion behind them. "I… I don't know what to say…" Fowl started, shaking his head slowly before a massive smile appeared. "Other than that, I expect a lot of ale, presents, and cake!"

Max laughed and ruffled the sweaty mess of hair on his friend's head. "That I can do. Think you can stop acting like a kid who lost their bag of candy?"

Smirking, Fowl nodded and then groaned. He glanced at Batrire and Tanila, who had stopped a few yards away and were anxiously watching what was happening.

"I, uh… am sorry, my love," Fowl muttered.

"For what?" Batrire asked, tapping her foot as she leaned against her staff, frowning at him.

"Gah, you're going to make me say it?"

She nodded at his question, grinning at her man.

"Fine!" he exclaimed, storing his helmet as he threw both hands into the air. He took a few steps over to her, getting down on one knee and smiling. "Forgive me, my love. You're my ore in a deep mine, the gold I hide in a chest. There is no other drink, even ale or hard liquor, that I desire more than you. I love you."

Max stood shocked as Batrire reached out with both hands and grabbed Fowl by the beard, yanking him to his feet and pulling his lips to hers. Fowl gave a small cry from her quick movement, but the two passionately kissed in the hottest place he could ever imagine doing so.

Tanila moved over next to Max, trying to give the two dwarfs, who were making grunting noises as they pressed their lips together, some privacy.

"Well…that seemed to make things better," she said with a grin.

Max looked at her, staring into her eyes. "When people stop hiding behind their pain and fears, admit their feelings for the other, stuff like that happens."

Tanila coughed and looked away, knowing her face was flushed from the heat and thankful it couldn’t get any redder.

“We’re going to leave, you two!” Max declared as he turned. “I'd do that somewhere else where you don’t have to worry about a salamander burning your beards off.”

Fowl and Batrire started laughing, pulling away for some hot, volcanic air.

“He’s right, my love. We can pick this up back in the carriage.”

“Gods, no!” Tanila exclaimed. “If you want to do that, get your own damn carriage or wait till you get back to the inn.”

Both dwarves laughed, walking hand in hand, as they moved past Max and Tanila.

“That would have been an awful carriage ride,” Max said as they followed the pair. “There was so much grunting.”

Laughing, Tanila nodded.

“A party?” Alexander said, a hint of excitement in his voice. “For a dwarf turning fifty… that is a big thing. Tell me what you are thinking.”

Pulling out a list Batrire and Fowl had helped him write, Max handed it to the proprietor of the Heavenly Pineapple and watched as the man’s eyes grew large. His eyebrows lifted and continued to move upward as he read further down the list.

“This… this is a lot of stuff, and are you certain about that?” he asked as he pointed to an item on the list.

Max shrugged and nodded. “Apparently, dwarves love it. Besides, if I understood them right, you should expect at least two hundred people, mostly dwarves, to attend. It could be as high as four hundred when word gets out about this party.”

Grimacing, Alexander looked around his dining area, glancing at the booths and tables. “Do we have to host it here? I mean, not that I don’t want to, but dwarves are known for being rowdy, and all of this won’t fit inside my place.”

Max started to laugh and nodded, pulling out five gold coins from his pocket. “I’m not sure of the cost, but if this isn’t enough, let me know. Find a place outside or a massive warehouse for all I care. The only thing that matters is that Fowl knows we love him, and his fiftieth birthday is one he will never forget!”

Alexander nodded and started tapping his chin. “I actually have an idea about where we can do this. Four days, right?”

“Yes, sir, and we would like to start right as the sun goes down. Otherwise, I’m certain there won’t be enough ale in town to cover all of this.”

Laughing, Alexander put the list away and grinned. “I think we can make this a party the entire city will talk about for years. Just leave it to me!”

149 - Window Shopping

149 - Window Shopping - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

The next day went about as well as Max and the others could have hoped for. Tom had orange rings waiting for them, offering a similar effect as the ice ones. He had taken back the ones he loaned them for the ice dungeon and laughed when they asked about the ones needed for the tower. He had smiled and promised to come to the party for Fowl in three days, even bringing Everett and some of the other Faction members.

The fire dungeon was cleared faster than the ice one. With the heat mostly abated and no snow impeding their vision, they watched Tanila work her magic, easily slaying everything. Even the boss couldn't withstand her ice spells. Talina weakened it to a point where when Max moved in, he killed it with a single blow to the head.

The lack of stats or skills Consumed was a moot point. Everyone but Max was almost level forty-six as they exited the fire dungeon and made their way through the troll one. Clearing it to the boss, they found themselves closer to level fifty with time on their hands.

"We've got four hours at least," Max said as they left the troll dungeon. "Do we want to farm another dungeon at one of the other halls or call it a day?"

"It's not worth the trip," Fowl replied. "Tomorrow, we can clear the troll dungeon and then check out one of the other halls. Besides, Batrire and I need to do a little shopping if you two are okay with us going off on our own."

Max and Tanila glanced at each other, both nodding.

Batrire smiled and then grabbed Fowl's hand. "Let's go! Time to spend some money on me!"

Smiling, Fowl let himself be led away, mouthing *help me* at the both of them.

"What about you?" Max asked. "Wanting to do anything?"

Tanila looked at Max, gently biting her lip, hoping he didn't notice. "I'm probably going to go shopping as well. I need to get something for the party. What about you?"

"Wait. We need to dress up?" Max asked, surprised by this revelation. "I didn't realize we needed to."

"Oh, Seth," Tanila said as she shook her head. "Yes! As the party host, you need to be dressed in something other than the clothes you typically wear. This will be a big deal, and people expect you to look nice."

Sighing, Max frowned. "I don't suppose you would be willing to help me shop? I honestly have no idea what to even buy."

Smirking, Tanila nodded. "I'd be happy to help!"

“What do you think?” Max asked as he spun around in the outfit he never expected he might one day own.

Tanila moved around him, studying the suit the tailor had put him in from every angle. The black jacket had silver embroidery running along the lapels and arms. The legs had a matching pattern going down the outside seam. Underneath was a red shirt that caught the eye before drawing her gaze to his face. Even the black boots that were polished and shined like gems. She could see he felt uncomfortable.

“I’d almost say with a cape or a cane, I could take you to see the queens, but for this event, I doubt you would need anything nicer than this,” she said, continuing her path around him.

Standing on the small platform, Max watched Tanila look him up and down. They were the same height for the first time, and looking at her from this angle felt weird.

“There is no way I’m wearing a cape or carrying a cane. It’s bad enough that it feels like this jacket is trying to strangle me!”

She laughed, and the tailor standing a few feet away chuckled quietly.

“We’ll take it,” Tanila said, turning to the older man. “We need it in two days. That won’t be a problem, will it?””

The older man adjusted his glasses and shook his head, his silver hair never moving from its affixed position. “I can do that. Let me take a few final measurements, and I will have it ready for pickup.”

Tanila smiled and nodded.

As the man got back to work measuring, Max almost coughed when the man’s knuckle brushed his manhood.

“Which side, sir?”

Max blinked, staring at the man, not having any idea what he was asking. “Sorry? Which side what?”

Glancing over his shoulder at Tanila, who was smirking, the tailor looked back at Max and spoke in a hushed tone. “Which side do you hang on?”

Max felt his face get warm and knew it probably matched the shirt's color. “Oh! The right!”

“I suspected,” the tailor replied, making a mark on the outside of the black pants with a piece of white chalk. “Now then, please hold your arms out to the side.”

Across the room, Max could see that Tanila was having more fun than he thought was possible as the man began the last round of measurements.

Just wait… your turn is coming next!

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Tanila asked, frustrated at Max’s response.

“I mean, you look amazing in all of them. How am I supposed to say one is better than the other?”

Tapping her foot, she turned and looked in the three mirrors behind her, admiring her green dress. It was a little more formal than she preferred, but the material reminded her of outfits she had not worn in a long time. The smooth and soft fabric felt amazing on her skin, and it hugged her in the right spots, showing the curves that she often kept hidden under her Mage’s robes.

“I’m not sure there is a good answer for me,” Max said. “The yellow one was kind on your hips and accentuated the front portion of your body with how low the cut went. That red one would match my outfit, but we both know it wasn’t you. Your face told me as much the first time you saw yourself in it.”

Max moved from where he was standing and approached her, looking closer at the dress she currently wore as she slowly turned.

“The black one looked nice, but it didn’t feel formal enough, especially if I’m wearing that suit you picked out for me. It would be more of a date dress if I had to say.”

Tanila laughed, grinning as she looked at Max’s reflection in the mirrors.

“This one is very nice, but if you choose it, your hair should be red. I think it would do wonders with how your braid hangs down now if you had red hair and some green pins in it.”

Raising an eyebrow, Tanila turned and studied Max’s expression, seeing how he was watching her body in the dress and not her eyes. “Where did you learn about hairpins?”

Rolling his eyes, Max pointed at a wall across the room that was displaying an assortment of hair accessories. “I’ve got a mother and a sister and, thankfully, have two eyes that can see.”

“He seems to be quite a catch,” the dressmaker said as Tanila stood there quietly for a moment. “Not many men or even women I know would point out the things he just did.”

Nodding, Tanila turned and looked in the mirror again, pulling her braid over her shoulder and studying it against the material.

“Can you have it ready in two days?” Tanila asked, not looking at the dressmaker but at her own reflection.

“I can!” she replied happily. “Thankfully, as you might have noticed, your features fit well with it already, so it will only need a few minor adjustments.”

“And shoes? I take it you have some I could look at?”

The woman’s eyes sparkled, and she nodded. “I have many. Should we ask for his opinion as well?”

Max groaned and shook his head. “I’d prefer not to be one to make shoe choices.”

Both laughed, and Max moved to the chair he had waited in each time Tanila went to change.

Can I ever win her heart completely?

His heart struggled with the pain from that thought, knowing she had feelings for him but was scared.

You could make her obey you…

The voice shocked him, having not spoken in days. Max couldn't figure out what had happened. For a while, it seemed that every moment, it tried to convince him to let it have free rein. Then, it appeared to change after he was willing to lose everything and not submit.

I'm not like that. I won't force people to obey me.

The same dreaded laughter echoed through his mind.

One day, you will not have a choice. With power comes responsibility, and you will one day have great power. Your choices will shape this world and others.

No hint of evil or desire tainted those words, as they had so often before. Max knew it was simply stating a fact.

He had seen others carry the weight of being in charge and responsible many times, from his early days in the bakery, when he worked hard to acquire that skill, to seeing Baker Wright manage his business while juggling family and work.

Even now, Max felt the weight of leading the group he considered his family. Sometimes, he was afraid of the consequences of his decisions or the direction he pointed the group toward.

Lost in his thoughts, Max began considering what his choices may have cost him and the others when a cough made him look up.

Standing before him was a pair of gorgeous feet in silver-colored heels that made those calves he recognized as belonging to Tanila stand out. Eyes moving upward, he saw the green dress appear, hugging her legs and hips, a slit on the side going up to her mid-thigh.

Wow… all of her skin is that amazing color…

From there, the dress fit her hips perfectly, then came close around her tiny waist until his eyes found her breasts, hidden behind the green fabric, with the tops just visible as the fold of fabric kept the dress secure without any straps. Max couldn't help but chuckle when he saw the red hair he had mentioned draped over her shoulder with a few pins made of silver with green gems decorating her braids.

Letting his eyes continue rising to meet hers, Max's jaw dropped in awe. Even her eyes were now green, sparkling with a dangerous twinkle.

"Wow…"

Smirking, she shook her head and moved the braid over her shoulder and back. "Just wow?" she asked, begging him to answer that question.

Nodding, Max smiled, keeping his eyes on hers. "I'm not sure you can go like that," he said.

Frowning, Tanila looked down at herself and then back at Max. “Why not? Is something wrong?”

“Yes,” Max replied, allowing his smile to grow. “If you arrive like that, no one will remember that it’s Fowl’s birthday. Instead, they will all have their hearts stolen by you.”

Tanila shook her head, trying to fight the color coming to her cheeks as Max stared at her. “Dangerous words from an adventurer like yourself. Perhaps you won’t mind keeping me safe from the dwarven horde and their lustful eyes?”

Max laughed and stood, giving a slight bow. “It would be my honor to protect you from everyone but myself.”

The dressmaker behind Tanila laughed, and both of them blushed slightly as they remembered the woman was there.

“Forgive me,” the woman apologized. “You two make the cutest couple.”

Tanila blushed again, and Max smiled.

“We do, don’t we?” he replied.

150 - A Magical 50

[150 - A Magical 50 - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

The last two days had been a non-stop grind fest.

After clearing the troll dungeon, they made their way to the northwest corner of town, entering the level forty-five dungeon, the dungeon of goatmen. The goatmen were slightly more challenging than the trolls, as they had no elemental weakness, so Tanila couldn't one-shot them with her standard spells. Still, Max and Fowl quickly discovered how to combine everyone's abilities for one massive dungeon clear.

The goatmen were quick, but Max outpaced them, easily staying ahead as he ran across the open plains of the dungeon, luring a massive horde toward Fowl.

"There's got to be at least forty of them!" Fowl shouted, banging the two shields against each other. “I'm glad he thinks so highly of me."

Tanila shook her head at the sight before her. Max's idea came when a second group aggroed on them during a fight the day before. A bleat from one of the first packs had brought a nearby group to them. Even with ten goatmen, Fowl withstood their blows and kicks, his constitution and armor providing the protection needed. Max and Tanila had worked together, killing the now larger group in a dazzling explosion of magical power.

"Are you sure about this?" Batrire asked. “I have my new spell, but it's only good for ten seconds and has a two-day cooldown."

"We'll be fine," Tanila replied. The worst thing that could happen is that Fowl could die and not get to go to his birthday party."

Fowl scoffed, not taking his eyes off the pack of monsters approaching them as Max finished one last lap to pick up stragglers. "We'll be done here and can then go pick up our clothes!" shouted Fowl. “Besides, we are all level forty-seven now. At this rate, we should hit forty-eight after the next floor."

The two women nodded and watched as Max approached. Even from this distance, they could see his smile.

Max ran by Fowl, moving to stand just a few yards behind his dwarven friend.

"Be ready!" Max shouted, even though he didn't need to. The groups he had been gathering the past twenty minutes would arrive in less than ten seconds.

There were so many goatmen it almost looked funny. A horde of eight-foot-tall monsters all bunched together, shoulder to shoulder, carrying swords, hammers, and clubs. Their bottom halves looked exactly like a goat’s would if it stood on its back legs, dark black fur covering their lower extremities. The top half was a muscular and chiseled man with a hairy chest.

"Fifteen seconds!" Tanila cried out.

Max nodded, counting down until it was time for his spell to join her.

The sound of hooves pounding into the green grass of the dungeon floor rumbled in their ears, and Max wondered what their new partner, whom they were supposed to meet at the party, would think if she saw this. Tom still had yet to tell them her name.

"Casting!" Max shouted, taking a few steps back as the creatures raced past Fowl, their eyes all focused on him.

"Taunting!"

Dirt, grass, and chunks of stone sprayed Max as the goatmen targeting him immediately tried to stop and kill the dwarf holding two shields around himself like a cocoon. The sound of swords and hammers pounding against Fowl was only overshadowed by the bleating cries of frustration as they couldn't all reach the tiny dwarf.

Max's fire nova went off first. His spell washed over the collective group of monsters, slightly burning their flesh and scorching the grass beneath their feet.

Tanila’s spell came next as she stood a few yards further away. The waves of fire rolled away from her, each one dissolving more of the group of goatmen and filling the air with the sweet aroma of roasted goat.

As bleats of pain filled the air, Max was already swinging with his halberd, cutting through the charred and burnt corpses, not waiting to see If they were dead or not.

A fireball blasted past him, slamming into the area that he had cleared and sending another explosion of fire that blew chunks out of the burnt husks.

Max couldn't see through the carnage, but his sonar skill told him a few were still alive. Only three enemies remained on the far side from where Max was, barely moving as their flesh continued to burn.

Running through the burnt bodies, Max approached the three, struggling to move as their bodies still burned. He cut them down in moments, ending their lives and accomplishing something he hadn't been sure would work when he planned it.

"That's all of them!"

"Gods!" exclaimed Fowl. "Why didn't we do this sooner? Look at your experience bar!"

Max could only smile, wondering how much experience they had received.

"That was... three-quarters of a level," Tanila muttered. Had Max not had the Sonar skill, he would never have heard those softly spoken words.

"Ockrim be praised!" Batrire shouted. "He does love us!"

"Bah, woman, stop pestering the gods, and someone help me get out of this mess!" Fowl shouted, slamming his shield into the charred remains. "And get me some ale and a snack! This smell is amazing!"

Max laughed as he cut through the bodies, watching them crumble from a solid hit. "I found the portal to the next floor. Are we up for trying one more?"

"Hell ya!" Fowl exclaimed. "We're hitting level forty-eight tonight!"

Batrire nodded, and Tanila sighed as both moved in the direction Max pointed.

"What have we gotten ourselves into?" Tanila asked. “Surely those two realize we can't do dungeon runs like this forever."

Scoffing, Batrire shrugged. "Those two are impossible to figure out. The fact that they thought this whole thing up and Seth decided to try what he did scares me. Who thinks of that kind of stuff?"

Tanila nodded, watching as their warriors laughed and chatted about how everything had gone. "We're in trouble with those two, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

Max slashed the last four goatmen still alive, each so burnt it couldn't move.

"I'm halfway to level forty-nine," Fowl said. "Someone pinch me, please... this isn't possible."

"Happy Birthday,” Max said as he cut a path through the bodies so Fowl could get out. “I don’t want to make a big deal about this, but your party isn’t till tomorrow night. We could get up a little earlier, head here first, and easily clear these two dungeon floors. Then, if needed and time permitting, we could hit the troll dungeon.”

Fowl glanced at the other two members of his party, having put away both shields and removed his helmet. He tried to give them a cute gaze, but instead, he looked constipated, with his eyes squinted and his lips pursed together. Both women started to laugh.

“It looks like you got gas!” Tanila finally managed to say between her fits of laughter.

“I thought the same thing,” Batrire howled. “Like he was trying to push out a turd or something.”

Fowl rolled his eyes and grumbled. “This is what I have to put up with. Now, what do you two say? Go pick up our stuff for the party and an early morning dungeon clearing? Just think, we could all be level fifty by tomorrow night if Ockrim is kind!”

Nodding as one, Tanila and Batrire agreed that Fowl was correct.

“I’m up for it,” Batrire said. “I still have my shield, which makes me feel much better about you two being stupid.”

“Well then, let’s get our clothes and rest up,” Fowl said. “I’m still wondering if I can get Alexander to share any of the details about tomorrow. That man’s lips are tighter than some dwarven women I know.”

“Oh really?” Batrire asked, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at him. “How would you know this?”

Fowl began to stutter, and Max laughed, pushing his friend toward the portal to leave.

“Leave him be, Batrire. I don’t want him in trouble just yet. We have a party tomorrow and need him to be able to stand on his own.”

Fowl was dancing in the nasty, murky water of the troll dungeon.

“FIFTY!! I’M FIFTY!” he shouted as he kicked water up in excitement.

“We know,” Batrire said with a wink. “I already told you happy birthday this morning.”

“Bah, woman! You know what I’m talking about! But can you believe it? I turned fifty and managed to get level fifty on the same day! I can’t think of a better gift than this!”

Max smiled, shaking his halberd in the water to remove the blood. Two trolls were dead, one by fire and the other by his weapon. “How much for the rest of you?” Max asked. “I can’t let this one have all the fun, and we still have enough time for a few more.”

“Do we have to?” Fowl asked, winking at Max.

“Only if you want the real gift Batrire has for you tonight.”

Fowl turned and looked at their dwarven healer, trying to see what Max was talking about. Batrire looked confused, unsure if Max knew about what she had gotten Fowl.

“Uh… yeah, Seth is right,” she replied. “No present if you don’t get us level fifty also.”

“Well, let’s go!” Fowl roared, pointing in a direction of the swamp they hadn’t gone yet.

“Fifty!” Batrire exclaimed, her smile almost as large as Fowl’s. “Finally!”

Tanila came close and hugged her, both giddy even though they were standing in knee-deep water.

Fowl came running over, ignoring the corpse at his feet, and picked up Batrire, hugging her and spinning her around, sending murky water in a circle. “Congratulations, my love! We’ve done it!”

Max stood a few yards away, watching his family celebrating. They were laughing and dancing, excited for each other.

“What are you doing grinning like that?” Fowl asked, looking back at Max. “Get your sorry human arse over here and join the group hug!”

Nodding, Max moved to join them, laughing and celebrating the impossible actually happening.

“You look amazing,” Max said, helping Tanila out from the carriage first. His heart was pounding, and he silently prayed that his palms wouldn’t sweat.

Behind him was a massive warehouse that was lit up, with noise coming from the two large open doors. A throng of dwarves flowed in, as did the occasional human and elf.

“So do you,” Tanila replied with a wink. “That red shirt really pops.”

Max chuckled and shrugged. “Just trying to match your hair.”

“Stop flirting and move!” Fowl howled from inside the carriage. He had a blindfold on and was being directed by Batrire toward the exit. “I can hear the music and dwarven laughter! Even better, I can smell the ale!”

“That’s your breath,” Batrire muttered. “You had two tankards before we left.”

“So? What does– Woaahhhh!”

Max grabbed Fowl under his arms, lifted him from the carriage, and deposited him onto the ground, ensuring his feet were set before removing his hands.

“I swear, if you weren’t family, I’d cut your balls off,” Fowl growled.

“They’d just grow back bigger and better,” Max replied, earning a laugh from all three.

He turned and helped Batrire out of the carriage, admiring her blue dress. Her hair was done up, and small blue teardrops were scattered perfectly within it. Her beard was braided and bound together by blue and silver rings.

“You look beautiful as well,” Max informed her.

“Bah, stop that,” Fowl hissed. “I haven’t seen her yet!”

Both women laughed, and Max moved to Tanila’s side, offering her his arm.

“Shall we?”

As they approached the two warehouse doors, Alexander saw them coming. Suddenly, the building went silent. The music and laughter stopped, and only the sound of a donkey baying could be heard from the warehouse.

Max and the others tried to not stop as they admired the inside of the warehouse, larger than most, with a line of casks thirty yards long on one side. There was a pen that had a donkey with a saddle on it and hay lining the hard floor. A booth with a seat over water sat nearby while a wet dwarf was climbing back into the chair, trying not to laugh. Tables and chairs were scattered around, and huge tables full of food lined one of the walls. At the far end was a stage with a band on it, all waiting for Fowl to take his place so they could start playing again.

Everywhere, dwarves smiled. All wearing brown suits like Fowl, they grinned at the foursome as they walked toward the stage.

“I can smell ale!” Fowl shouted. “And drunk dwarves!”

The almost silent room broke into a loud roar of laughter, and a few dwarves clapped and stomped their feet.

Fowl was grinning, every tooth showing as he reached the first step to the stage, letting Batrire guide him up. After he was in the middle of the stage, Max moved to stand to one side of Fowl while Batrire stood on the other.

“Dwarves, friends, and faction members!” Max shouted, raising a hand to silence those chatting quietly. “Tonight, we honor Fowl Hammerfall on his fiftieth birthday!”

Applause and whistling came as Fowl fidgeted, wanting to take off the blindfold more than anything.

“Tonight, may we celebrate his first stage of adulthood, and may his cup never run dry!”

Cheers, and *here here*’s came from the dwarves.

“In a moment, the love of his life will take off the blindfold, letting him see life as a dwarf should. Surrounded by his kin and his family. Tonight, you are his family, as all dwarves celebrate together as one! May Fowl’s shield always be unbroken, may his hammer always strike true, and may his children make him praise Ockrim for the joy that they bring!”

At those last words, the room was silent, tears flowing down the faces of many of the hardened dwarves who knew the truth of the words Max had spoken. He knew the oaths and the bond they shared.

“Batrire.”

She smiled and removed Fowl’s blindfold, causing the dwarf to squint for a moment as the multi-colored lights in the room revealed how full it was.

“Happy birthday, Fowl Hammerfall!” Batrire shouted, lifting her man’s hand into the air.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, FOWL HAMMERFALL!”

The room echoed with the shout as over two hundred dwarves raised their hands or tankards into the air.

Fowl wiped away a tear and kissed Batrire, smiling as the band behind them began to play.

He then turned and grabbed Max, hugging him as tight as possible. “I can never repay you,” he declared, wiping tears from his face.

“Sure you can. Just promise me you’ll harvest all the balls from now on,” Max replied, grinning from ear to ear.

Fowl laughed and shook his head.

The party had just begun.

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

Can you believe it's Friday?!

It's been a week... so many school events as the year ends. Awards ceremony and powder puff football today (which my daughter is in and apparently a 'unit' according to the coaches... ;))

Did you know that you can leave a review on Amazon if you've read Book 1 and Book 2? It would be amazing if you were willing to do that!

((Don't forget you're always welcome to re-read it on Kindle Unlimited if you want!))

Book 4 is going strong on Patreon, and the readers are leaving some great comments :)

Book 5 is 20k+ words along, and earlier this week, I had those goosebumps and great feels for some of the stuff that I wrote and what I know is coming down the pipe!

REGARDING Paperback books - they are coming... trust me... here is a sample of the 3rd book.

That's all folks! Enjoy the weekend and looking forward to you all hitting book 4 soon!!

((PSA - Relationship Max / Tanila spoiler))

Spoiler
Wraps up book 3 - no more dancing around by end of book

Trust me - there's a reason if you haven't figured it out yet.

151 - A Dwarven Party

[151 - A Dwarven Party - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“This is an interesting party,” Everett said, leaning against one of the wooden tables that Alexander had scattered around the warehouse. “I’ve never seen so many dwarves in one location. Should I ask how you got so many to come?”

Max shook his head. “That was all Batrire. Apparently, there are a few locations where dwarves like to gather and drink, and she mentioned this party to them. Free ale, food, and a fiftieth birthday gets you a lot of dwarves.”

Tom started laughing hysterically, and the other two men tried to figure out why.

“Over there! Those dwarves on the donkey! It’s the funniest thing ever!”

Max nodded, having spent a few moments earlier in the evening watching dwarves try to ride a donkey that didn't want to be ridden. A few broken bones occurred, but Alexander's healer was handling the injuries.

Turning his attention away from the dwarf who just got bucked off the donkey, Tom looked at Max and held out his hand.

"What's that?"

"A handshake. Now shake it," Tom replied.

Shrugging, Max shook the older man's hand.

"Congratulations on level fifty!"

Nodding, Max closed his eyes and then shook his head. "Fowl?"

"Fowl," Tom replied with a smile. "I'm not sure if it was the ale or the excitement, but he broke like a wall when a dragon hits it."

Max looked at Everett, who shrugged. "Tom's not known for his analogies. Regardless, both of us are slightly impressed and also have questions about how. The problem is your newest party member is a day late. She and the rest of her party ran into a problem and got delayed. It will probably be another few days before they get out of the tower. Is that OK?"

Max nodded. "No worries. We'll keep ourselves busy."

"Do you need help with anything?" Tom asked. "Obviously, we want to help you four succeed. We can get you into the tower's first floor in a day or two if you want. Like a small trial run."

"We'll wait, but thank you. No point ruining the surprise."

Everett's fingers were drumming against the side of his tankard as he watched Max and Tom talk.

"You four are going to attempt the demon or dragon dungeons, aren't you?"

Both Tom and Max turned to see Everett studying Max.

"What? No!" Tom said, looking at Max. Seeing that he wasn't denying it, Tom groaned. "Why would you risk those dungeons? And with only four of you?! Surely you know how dangerous they are!"

Max nodded at each question, ignoring the frantic tone in Tom's voice.

"Do you trust us?" Max asked, his voice calm and steady.

"What?"

Max glanced around the party, seeing that no one seemed to be paying any attention to the three humans huddled around one of the tables in a warehouse filled with dwarves. "Do you trust us? Are you willing to let us rise or fall on our own accord, or do you see us as nothing more than a group to farm materials for the Faction?"

Tom’s mouth hung open, and Max saw Everett grin.

“We wouldn’t–”

“Don’t, Tom,” Everett said, cutting off Tom. “We won’t lie to them. They're smart enough and strong enough to know what's best for both themselves and us.”

Everett studied Max as the two of them stood quietly for a bit.

“Ever since you first walked into my office, I knew you four were different,” Everett admitted. “No one has had balls like the four of you in a long time. Even your elf mage has more balls than many of the men who try to join our Faction.”

Picking up his tankard, Everett dumped it out before pulling a bottle from his storage and opening it, pouring a tiny amount into his tankard. He motioned to Max, who mimicked the older man, dumping out his ale and handing his cup over.

“This bottle is worth more than I care to discuss, and Tom can tell you the number of times I have actually shared this with anyone, even him.”

Max glanced at Tom, seeing the man shaking his head as he frowned. “Once… only once with me.”

“Your group is an abnormality, and yes, we have high hopes that you four will propel our Faction to the top in time. If you continue to accomplish a fraction of what you already have and kill what I hope you will face, everyone in the Faction will be stronger because of it.”

Everett looked at Tom, who was still frowning. “Empty your cup, you fool,” the Faction leader said with a groan. “I’m not opening this bottle again anytime soon.”

Without hesitating, Tom poured out his cup and then handed it to Everett, smiling as the man poured a little bit into it.

“Now listen, Seth. I’ll shoot straight with you and ask you to shoot straight with me. Why are you all climbing the tower?”

Max looked at the man, noticing his eyes were watching his reactions, trying to pick up the smallest indication of a lie. “It’s simple. We’re going to defeat it.”

Tom started to speak, and Everett shook his head, holding his hand up to stop him.

“Then tonight, we drink to the impossible. I’ll support you as long as I’m the leader, making sure to help in any way I can, but I won’t make the climb easy. If you’re serious about this, you must learn things the hard way. You must face each floor with as little help as we can provide because,” Everett paused, leaning closer to Max, “if you have any hopes of getting past the fiftieth floor you will need to be stronger than every one of us.”

Max smiled, nodding as the man put all his cards on the table.

“We wouldn’t have it any other way,” Max replied.

Everett nodded and lifted up his tankard. “To your dream then. May we see you achieve what none of us believe is possible, and may we be the greatest Faction because of your party’s success.”

They all clanked their cups, and Max watched as Everett and Tom tilted their glasses upside down, swallowing the contents quickly.

Both men sucked in air rapidly, grimacing and smiling at the same time.

“Drink it quick,” Everett said. “Trust me.”

Max nodded and mimicked their actions, feeling the alcohol hit his tongue, and a sensation of warmth and heat enveloped his mouth, running down the back of his throat and traveling all the way to his stomach.

Within seconds he felt a warm sensation all over and found himself sucking in a breath of air like they had.

“Wow, that tastes like… I’m not sure. It’s so smooth, but… I can feel it already.”

Everett nodded and started to laugh. “It kicks like a mule. Like a mule kicking a dwarf dumb enough to try and ride it.”

Tom started to laugh louder than he should, and Max could feel the alcohol beginning to make his mind go slightly numb.

[Regeneration]

It took a moment, but after a handful of seconds, he felt the effects starting to wear off, his mind clearing as the slight dizzy effect that had begun to set in vanished.

Once he felt back to normal, Max smiled and gave a bow.

[Regeneration Expired]

“Don’t mind me. I need to go and spend some time with my friends.”

The two men nodded and laughed, each smiling more than Max could remember seeing before.

“Are you okay?” Tanila asked as Max stood beside her, scanning the crowd of dwarves laughing and dancing with Fowl and Batrire.

“I am,” he replied, smiling slightly. “I’ll tell you what Tom and Everett said later but know I’m ready for what is about to come. Never in my life have I wanted anything more than I want what is in front of me now.”

Shifting under his gaze, Tanila’s cheeks reddened, and Max grinned. “You seem a little bold with that statement,” she replied. “Are you certain that you mean what you are saying?”

Max nodded, moving closer and standing slightly on his toes, as her shoes had made her tall enough that he had to meet her eyes. “I think we should dance.”

“What?! To this song? We’re not prepared for the rowdyness on the dance floor!” she exclaimed.

Nodding, Max moved back and then ran to the stage, jumping onto it and moving to where the band leader was. After he said something, the dwarf nodded and cut the music.

Groans came from around the room and a few boos as the song stopped mid-way through it, but Max moved to the front of the stage, smiling as he held his hands up.

“Forgive me, but someone once told me that a bond between two dwarves is a very special thing!” Max shouted.

All around the room, dwarves shouted that he was correct.

Smiling, Max pointed at Fowl and Batrire, who were breathing hard from the fun they were having. “The birthday dwarf has a very special lady, one he calls his love, and they have pledged themselves to each other in a way that goes beyond anything else. They protect each other. Fowl shields Batrire with his body and armor, gladly throwing himself before any creature or person who might mean her harm.”

Fowl reached over and grabbed Batrire’s hand, nodding and smiling as he looked into her eyes.

“Batrire protects her brave warrior, using the gifts that Ockrim has given her to keep him healed even when he was close to death!”

Cheers rose, and the dwarves clapped and stomped their feet.

“Tonight, we will give them, and those who have such a person in their life, the chance/opportunity to dance to the song of life! Join them as these two dance to a song that only those with a bond like theirs can! If you have someone like that tonight, do not wait or hide behind fears and doubts. Tell them, and celebrate life together for as long as the gods allow it!”

Max immediately turned and signaled the band to start. They began playing a slower song, the drums sounding like a heart beating, safe and secure. The wood instruments took on a tone that carried the joy of the hope of a new day. The single harp strummed, its crystal clear sound filling the warehouse.

The dance floor began to empty as Batrire and Fowl came together, holding hands and smiling as they moved slowly, bodies close and whispering in each other’s ears. A few other pairs of dwarves joined them on the floor.

Max turned and looked at Tanila, who was shaking as he jumped off the stage and moved to where she stood.

“Dance with me. Please.”

Max held out his hand to her, waiting, baring everything he had to show her how he felt.

“But, what about–”
“None of it matters, Tanila,” Max said, stopping her from voicing excuses or concerns. “I will never stop loving you, and no matter what happens in life, I will always protect you. If that is enough, then dance with me.”

A few tears slid down her cheeks, and Max lifted his hand, wiping them away gently.

She grabbed his hand and squeezed, nodding and smiling.

Together, they stepped onto the dance floor, holding each other close and letting the song control their movements. He laid his head against her chest, sad that he couldn't put it higher, but the way her skin felt against his cheek made him feel alive.

"I should have taken off my shoes," she whispered, leaning against him. "Then you wouldn't be so short."

Max chuckled and nodded once. "And yet I think every man, elf, and dwarf in this building would agree I have the best place to lay my head."

She started to laugh, her voice rising above the music as they wrapped their arms around each other.

Max saw Batrire and Fowl looking at them, smiling, tears staining their faces.

"Thank you," Fowl mouthed silently.

Smiling, Max winked, watching his dwarven brother laugh and roll his eyes before returning his attention to Batrire.

Closing his eyes for a few seconds, he was grateful for the world giving him this moment.

152 - Demonic Dungeons

[152 - Demonic Dungeons - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Max grinned at Fowl as the dwarves slid into the booth.

"You look like the donkey won multiple times," Max teased.

Holding his head, Fowl nodded and grimaced. "That ass sure did… she was a feisty one for sure… I still can't believe you knew about that."

"Thank Batrire," Max replied. "She helped with a lot of this party."

Fowl leaned over and put his head on Batrire's shoulder, sighing softly.

Tanila shifted under Batrire's gaze as her eyes flickered back and forth between Max and her.

"It seems we weren't the only ones dancing," Batrire said, raising her eyebrows at Talina a few times. "How did last night go?"

Max didn't react, keeping the smile he had on a moment ago in place. He glanced at Tanila, whose cheeks were turning redder by the second.

"Last night was a good night. Friends, family, and a party worth hiring a bard to sing about. What else could you be wondering about?" Max asked.

Snorting, Batrire groaned after not getting a rise out of him and motioned to the food on the table. "We going to eat or what?"

“We will, then we need to head to our Faction house. Tom and Everett want to give us as much information as possible on the next two dungeons. They’re not excited about us attempting this, but I told them our long-term plans. They are on board.”

“What Seth really means,” Tanila added, “is that they understand the value of keeping us alive if we are going to attempt defeating every floor of the tower. So if we pull off the next two dungeons, the rules for us will be different than for the majority of the rest of the Faction.”

“Because of the perks?” Fowl asked, keeping his eyes closed and his head on Batrire’s shoulder.

“Yes,” Max answered. “Ten floors is five percent, and on tower floor fifty, we are looking at twenty-five percent. Combined with some of our armor, the potential to resist damage and spells gives us a leg up most won’t ever have.”

“So what is the plan?” Batrire asked as she grabbed a piece of fruit from a plate.

“Eat breakfast and then prepare for tomorrow,” Tanila replied. “We only get one shot at each dungeon. We need to try and then get to the tower. Once word gets out that we are in the tower, things are going to change. Trust me.”

Grunting, Fowl shifted in the booth and sat up, opening his eyes and rubbing the massive bags that had formed under them. “Guess I’ll eat. We’re definitely getting a ride to the Faction house. I’m not ready for walking.”

Max chuckled and poured his dwarven friend a tankard of ale, ignoring the sigh Batrire let out as he did.

“That’s what I like about you, Seth. Taking care of me in my old age.”

The four of them laughed as they ate breakfast and talked about moments from last night.

“I won’t lie. Tom and I are nervous about your decision, but Seth already convinced us that nothing we say will stop you four from attempting these dungeons. With that said, here is what we can do.”

As Everett finished speaking, Tom opened a chest and started putting rings on the table. Four rings, almost invisible, were placed in a line.

“These will help when you fight the demons. Each one grants a ten percent reduction against demonic spells and, more importantly, makes you immune to their mental control.”

“Mental control?” Fowl stuttered. “They can control our minds?”

“With those rings, they cannot,” Everett replied, shaking his head. “Not all demons can do it, but some appear to be able to. No one likes it when their mage starts attacking them with spells or the tank turns and cuts down their own healer. It is one of the reasons why most people do not risk these dungeons at all.”

“Everett’s downplay this dungeon if you think that is everything to worry about. Portals will randomly appear and demons will drop out of them. Some will be invisible till they attack. This dungeon is dangerous even to experienced tower climbers.

There is a reason a guard stands outside the portal to verify that you are aware of the risks.”

“And to make note of any who defeat it,” Tanila stated.

Both men nodded.

“They will ask if you made it, but I would suggest that you lie,” replied Everett. “There is no way to tell if you do. I did some inquiring around the guild hall, and it appears no one has attempted the dungeon in a few years.”

Fowl groaned loudly as he leaned his head back on the chair. “Why do I let them talk me into these things?”

“Ignore him,” Batrire said. “He’s just feeling old and weak.”

“Or smart,” Tom replied. “Regardless, two floors of demons await you. The boss is on another level. There are different types that can appear. Each has different magical and physical attacks. Some are able to control multiple minds while others have been recorded as being fifty feet tall and carrying a weapon twenty feet or longer.”

“Ogre shite!” cursed Fowl. “Twenty feet?!”

“Or longer,” Tom said again. It's usually infused with some sort of magic as well.”

“Don’t forget they are resistant to magic, too,” Tanila said as if she were giving a lecture to everyone.

Everett chuckled and smiled at Tanila. “Would you like to go over everything else?”

“I’ll pass,” she replied with a grin. “Sorry, just trying to help.”

Everett nodded and pointed at the chest Tom was holding. Their advisor pulled out four potions, each a swirling black and white and unable to mix together.

“Those potions are rare and worth more than we will talk about, but if you’re going to do this, you’ll need them.”

“Curse cleansing,” Batrire whispered, leaning forward on her seat to get closer. “Those are rare.”

“Yes,” Tom said. “Try to not use them until you have to. You will know because the effects of whatever curse you succumb to will be too great to ignore. They can be random, but typically, it’s not till the second floor that you should need them.”

“And the boss… you’ll just have to fight the boss while cursed,” Everett stated. “Even if you take a potion while fighting the boss, it will cast another one every minute. The good news is most versions of the boss only cast one curse… but some don’t, so be prepared.”

“Is it too late to back out?” Fowl asked, glancing at his three companions. “Not that I want to be known as a chicken, but these two are doing their best to make us not want to attempt this.”

Max nodded. “It’s ok if you’re a chicken, we’d still love you, but none of us are changing our minds.”

Sighing, Fowl nodded and then moved till he could pick up one of the rings. Slipping it on his fat finger, it changed sizes until it was a perfect fit and vanished. “Holy Ockrim! Where did it go?”

“It’s still there, just hidden. None of us know why they do that. Once you return, we will need them back until later in the tower climb. Those are not items many have.”

Each of them took a ring and slipped it on, admiring how it vanished as Fowl’s had.

“Anything else?” Max asked as he stood up, carefully passing out the potions to each person in their party.

Everett extended a hand.

After they shook, the older man smiled. “Just be safe. If you can’t defeat the boss, run. None of us would think any less of you if that happened.”

“Understood,” Max replied as he turned to shake Tom’s hand. “That won’t happen, but we appreciate the advice and help.”

“You’re doing this tomorrow, right?” Tom asked.

“We are,” Tanila replied. “Coming to see us off?”

“No, but I will go and pray for your safety. Perhaps the gods will listen to me since it’s been a while.”

The four of them stood and, after saying their goodbyes, headed back to the inn.

“Tomorrow,” Tanila whispered, running her hand along Max’s cheek.

He smiled and nodded, taking her hand and kissed her fingers gently.

“Just another day in a dungeon for us.”

She started to protest, but Max put his finger against her lips and pulled her closer to him on the bed. “Yes I know it’s different, but I won’t approach it that way. We will come through because I know what my family is capable of. Especially the woman I love.”

Tanila reached over and pulled Max close, kissing him as they lay there in her room, a private place where no one else would intrude.

As they pulled apart and their lips slowly peeled from each other, Max ran his hand through her unbraided hair, smiling at the red color she had kept.

“Perhaps you should wear your hair like this tomorrow.”

He felt her tremble in his arms at that statement as her green eyes held his gaze. “That would be… a very special thing.”

Nodding, Max moved close, kissing her again for a moment, and then lay his head back against the pillow they were sharing. “It would… I would wear mine like that if I could.”

Tanila burst into laughter, pushing against his bare chest with her hand as Max tried to pull her close. Wrestling for a few, they let the worry of tomorrow disappear, enjoying the moment they had. For once, neither was concerned about what the world or the gods might think about the two of them being together.

Each was overjoyed by what they had found.

“You four are certain you understand the risks?”

Max and the others nodded as the armored guard watched them, her blue eyes studying them.

“And there are only four of you in your party… you understand that this is no normal dungeon. To venture into here is to risk death.”

“Death comes for us all,” Fowl replied. “Today, we will either conquer what most think is impossible, flee with our tails between our legs, or join our gods in our final resting place. Regardless, we won’t be dissuaded from going inside.”

The guard nodded, a slight upward curve to her lips as she heard Fowl speak. “Very well. I have written your names in my journal, given you the warning all receive and now offer you the chance to do what no other has in years. May the gods watch over you and grant you success.”

Max smiled and motioned to Batrire, who cast her buff.

“We’ll see you soon,” Max said as he pulled out his weapon and moved toward the portal.

It was different from every other one they had seen. It was pure black and pulsed with a power that seemed to warn them not to venture inside.

Max’s eyes took a moment to adjust, but he sensed something coming at him as he came through. Tanila had warned them that sometimes demons waited at the portal, unhindered, unlike in so many other dungeons, attempting to strike down those who entered.

His weapon slashed at the incoming shape he sensed with his sonar skill, and Max smiled as the creature began to try and pull back, noticing that he had somehow detected it and was about to cut into it.

“Time to die,” Max taunted as his halberd sliced through the creature that his eyes were now able to see.

A creature with purple skin and four arms, each holding sharp daggers, had been charging at him. Four eyes were blinking in confusion, and its two mouths were open. A shriek came from them as Max’s blade cut its chest in half.

Black blood squirted out, and the demon began to kick and writhe on the ground in apparent pain, but not quite dead yet.

Not wanting to hesitate, Max slashed down at the creature’s head, cutting it in half, two eyeballs on each side staring at him.

A cold chill ran through his body, and Max shuddered at the torrent of cold that suddenly assaulted him.

[Demonic Soul Consumed]

[1 Demonic Essence Collected]

“Holy shite,” Max cursed, sensing the other three behind him as he read the message.

“What in the world was that?!” Fowl exclaimed.

Glancing at the other three, who were watching the demon begin to dissolve into black particles, Max could see their concern about being attacked so soon.

“A demon,” he replied, turning his attention to the dungeon around them. “Get your gear ready. This isn’t like anything else we’ve faced.”

153 - A Whole Different Dungeon Experience

153 - A Whole Different Dungeon Experience - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

The dungeon was almost hard to look at sometimes, as where the sky should be was a swirling mist of different colors and lights constantly changing between darkness and light. Nothing made sense, and even the ground appeared to change occasionally. One section was twisted stone that suddenly turned into grey dirt and then into orange sand of some kind. The wind that blew was silent, but it occasionally left goosebumps on their skin, as if something was watching them from everywhere.

“What’s the plan?” Fowl asked as he rotated his shoulders a few times, holding his shield and hammer ready in case something came at them.

“We move along this weird path and try to find the next portal—all while trying not to die, obviously,” Max replied, earning a grunt and a glare from Batrire.

“What’s wrong, Seth?” Tanila asked. “Your voice is off slightly, and you’re tense. Don’t say it’s because of where we are.”

Max nodded and took a deep breath, wondering how to explain.

“I killed the demon, and I got a notification that I have acquired a Demonic Essense,” Max replied, seeing her and Batrire’s faces change at his words. “It said I have acquired one, so I’m not sure what that means or what it will do.”

“Tanila?”

Their elf mage shook her head, frowning at Batrire and her question. “I have no idea. I’ve never heard of that before… or at least not in a way I can explain right now.

Besides, we need to move. The longer we are in here, the more demons will come, attracted by our presence."

"Let's go," Fowl grunted. "If we're going to do this, I'd rather move now."

Max nodded. "Everyone spread out a few yards. My sonar will pick up if any try to sneak in. Fowl, you take point. I'll keep checking behind us and above. Tanila, you check left, and Batrire, you're watching our right side."

Max put his weapon up as he spoke and took out a bow and quiver, attaching it to his hip.

"Gods, that looks sexy," Tanila said with a wink. "A man with a real weapon."

Smiling, Max nocked an arrow and got started watching behind them. "Let's go."

"Three ahead, seventy yards or so," Fowl stated as he pointed to the three demons digging in the sand they were standing on. "What the hell are they doing?"

Max watched as the brown and grey demons, with massive claws as wide as Fowl, shifted and undulated around on the orange sand with their weird ribbed bodies. "I'm not sure, but I can shoot one, and then we can see how they react."

"Think that's best?" Batrire asked as she scanned the rocky landscape near them. "What if they bring friends?"

"I have no idea, but our options are limited. We can charge them, leave the rock we're on, and get onto the sand, but something tells me that's their strong point. It's only been four minutes, and we're about to start our first real fight. Something bad will happen at some point."

"Ready here then," Batrire replied.

Max turned and saw Tanila give him a thumbs up. "Alright, here goes nothing."

Drawing back the arrow, Max smiled as his mind told him where to aim. It felt almost like cheating. He had struggled to hunt rabbits in the woods back home, and now, with the archery skill he hadn't used but once to test, he felt as if he had been shooting every day for his whole life.

The bow made a *twang* as the arrow sped away, arcing and slamming into the demon in the middle before shattering.

Max already had his bow up and weapon out.

"Here they come!" Fowl shouted as the three began to charge toward them.

After a few strides, the demons jumped into the air and dove head-first into the sand, their claws sending up a cloud of orange dust as they disappeared beneath it.

"Be ready!" Max shouted as they stared at the edge of the sand twenty yards from them.

Seconds ticked past, and then at the edge where the rock and sand met, another dust cloud exploded into their sight as the three demons burst from the sand, landing a few yards onto the stone, and ran at them.

“Left!” Max shouted as he moved to the right.

Talina cast her ensnare spell, but nothing happened.

Max heard her curse, and a moment later, an ice prison started to form. The demon and its weird webbed feet began to slow down as ice surrounded its massive, muscular, brown, veiny legs.

Fowl charged forward, swinging his hammer, watching it get blocked by the middle demon with its massive claw. It then slammed its right claw at Fowl, shrieking as it hit Fowl’s shield and experienced the pain of his thorn ability.

The other demon ran to meet Max. One claw opened wide, sharp-looking edges prepared to snip something off, and the other held ready to bash him with.

Max swung his halberd, using its reach to see what it might do against these taller and tougher-looking demons.

The creature held its claw up, looking to parry and close the distance between them. Max’s axe blade on his weapon cut through the claw, the sound of a hard outer shell being crushed and slashed downward into the demon’s shoulder, sending a fountain of black blood everywhere.

Its other claw clamped onto the haft of Max’s weapon, preventing him from pulling it back as it cried in pain.

When Max jerked his weapon back, the demon moved with it, not letting go of the shaft, even though it meant the blade was still lodged in its shoulder.

Opening its mouth, the demon blasted orange sand at Max's face, forcing Max to close his eyes. When he did, the demon shoved Max’s weapon shaft upward and charged, using the distraction to charge Max.

His sonar skill told Max exactly where the creature was, and in a moment, he spun his weapon around. The hammer portion of the halberd came from underneath, and it slammed into the demon's chest, sending it flying backward.

A groan came, and Max knew Fowl was being pinched by one of the claws of the demon he faced. He was unable to see from the cloud that surrounded both of them.

Charging, Max brought his weapon down, cutting the demon’s head off, feeling the shiver of cold sweep through him.

[1 Demonic Essence Collected]

The demon came back at Max, stumbling slightly, its only claw held out with the tip toward him. Max whirled and spun, creating momentum and power, delivering a blow with the hammer side that squashed the head of the demon like a bug under one’s boot.

Black gore spread out, and Max ignored the cold wave and notification he got.

As soon as the demon was dead, the cloud of sand fell to the ground, letting him and Fowl see again.

Turning to where the last one was, Max saw it was frozen, not moving, and its head was missing.

“What the?”

“Please,” Tanila said, smiling at him. “It’s amazing what a stone spike will do to an immobilized head.”

Batrire let out a sigh of relief and then chuckled. “Score one for the mage.”

“How you feeling, Fowl? Seemed like you two were getting close.”

“Bah, I’m fine. Keep those bad puns to yourself,” Fowl snapped back, smiling the entire time.

“That wasn’t bad–”

Max raced to where Talina was, his halberd out and moving in a slash. “To me!”

She didn’t hesitate, immediately running right at Max as he raced past her, his weapon almost whistling from the speed until it cut through nothing.

A pink head with no eyes but two massive ears and a huge mouth with hundreds of teeth fell to the ground. Just a moment later, a body with eight arms, all with spikes and barbs, appeared, its head missing, only a yard from where Tanila had been.

“Holy–”

“Fire nova!”

Max cast his spell, moving toward Batrire. With his halberd, he sliced another head off, cutting down a second demon.

Shifting to his left again, he swung, three barbed pink arms falling to the ground before the demon who had previously owned them appeared, screeching at him.

His fire nova spell went off, flames rolling out, and six more demons like the other three appeared, all surrounding the group.

As one, with their stealth broken, they rushed forward, teeth rotating in a circle, and a long tongue flicked in and out of the hole.

Tanila’s standard fire nova went off, her flames going further away. As the first group screamed in pain, ten more demons appeared.

“Be ready on that taunt!” Max shouted, cutting down two of the closest before moving back to the party to prepare for the rush that came at them.

“Casting! Ten!”

The assault on them began as Fowl did what he could to protect Batrire, swinging his hammer and bashing his shield, trying to keep any of the creatures focused on him and not the woman he loved.

Holding his halberd above his head, Max twirled it, creating an area of death if any of the demons got close, as one found out the hard way, losing three arms before the blade came around and cut its burnt body in two.

The demons screeched at them, pressing closer, trying to find a way to get at them when Tanila's spell went off.

Massive spikes shot out from the ground at angles in a circle, impaling every creature for over fifteen yards. Barrels worth of black blood sprayed everywhere from the wounds she created, and after four seconds, the stone spikes disappeared, letting the creatures fall to the ground.

"Remove or destroy the heads!"

Max was already among the fallen, slicing and smashing the creatures' heads as quickly as he could. Fowl was bashing their heads in with his hammer and shield, ignoring their feeble attempts to grab hold of him with their barbs. The plate armor gave them no real place to hold on to, unlike the cloth-robed healer and mage would have.

"What in the gods was that?" Fowl shouted, looking at the carnage around them.

"Mage and healer killers," Tanila said with a shudder. "If it wasn't for Seth's ability to sense them…"

"We'd be dead," Batrire said. "They weren't strong, but that many would have overpowered most groups."

Max was breathing hard, not because of the effort but because of the number of essences he had acquired.

What are these? What are they used for?!

No reply came, but he feared what it might lead to.

"We need to move. The longer we stay somewhere, the more of a chance we run into these things. Stay close, and be ready."

"Gods, this is insane," Fowl stated as he smashed the last of the same pink creatures that had tried to attack for the third time. "How many are there of these?"

"Twenty-nine," Tanila answered. "There was a second wave hiding after the first… if Seth hadn't caught it, we might have been in trouble."

"They're learning. This group came as those six-legged whatever demons attacked."

Fowl kicked the massive demon Max had just mentioned. They were almost nine feet tall, with six massive short legs attached to a weird, misshapen long body. Their arms were nothing more than massive scythes. The white color of their bodies was hard to look at as they moved. Only two had come, but for a moment, Fowl wondered if they would actually be able to cut through his armor.

"It hasn't even been an hour," Fowl pointed out. "I still don't see a portal, and I can't stare that far ahead without this sky or whatever giving me a headache."

“Enough complaining! We need to move,” Batrire hissed. "The attacks will be less frequent if we keep moving!”

The four of them started moving again, each occasionally shifting their head or shuddering. Every step they took felt like someone was watching them.

154 - Things That Go Bump In A Dungeon

[154 - Things That Go Bump In A Dungeon - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

“Casting!”

Max grimaced as he tore the barb from his chain armor, watching Tanila send out another wave of fire, revealing fifteen more of the stealthed demons.

“We need to move!” Fowl shouted. “It’s only a hundred yards from here!”

Over sixty corpses of the pink demons lay scattered on the grey grass that was now covered in black blood.

The clang of a demon beating against Fowl’s shield rang out again, and Max ignored the green demon currently trying to kill his dwarven friend.

“I’m getting low! I need a break!”

Slicing through the smoking pink demon, Max spun and moved, carving off arms and limbs, no longer worried about killing them, just needing to stop the advance of monsters trying to kill his healer and mage.

“Seth!”

Glancing to see why Fowl was shouting, Max saw two more green, gorilla-looking demons with massive claws coming toward Fowl.

“Be ready to run! I’ll carry Tanila and Batrire!”

Carving through two more of the pink demons, Max sprinted back to his team, storing his weapon. He grabbed Tanila and Batrire and threw each over his shoulder.

“I hate this!” Batrire shouted as Max ran to Fowl.

“Shield out! Arm’s up!”

Fowl put his hammer into storage and spun his shield sideways, gripping it with both hands. The green gorilla demon slammed both hands against Fowl’s shield, raising them up again, when Max ran behind Fowl, slipping his hands into the dwarf’s armpits and driving forward.

They slammed into the demon, pushing it backward as Max did his best to jostle the women as little as possible, holding his dwarven battering ram before him.

“Yer running straight for them!” Fowl hollered, noticing Max was not trying to avoid the incoming demons.

“No time! Hold on!”

The demons roared, their mouths spinning in a circle, teeth rotating as they came right at the battering ram Max hoped would work.

[Power Strike]

Fowl glowed, and when they impacted the two demons, it was as if they weren’t even there, a spray of black blood and gore pouring across the four of them.

“Gah… ah… my mouth…” Fowl sputtered, spitting and gagging.

Max felt the blood on his face, squinting his eyes to make sure he was still moving in the right direction.

“Hold on!”

Setting the three of them down as they came through the portal, Max scanned the area with his Sonar skill to ensure nothing was trying to sneak up on them.

Fowl washed his face the second he could get a flask of water from his storage, rinsing and spitting out the black liquid and chunks that had gotten into his mouth.

“Quick thinking,” Batrire said as she massaged her stomach and chest. “Did you know that would work?”

Max shook his head and grinned. “I wasn’t sure if it would work, but it was better than nothing. Either way, I was pretty certain we could run through them.”

“Pretty certain?” Fowl said after gagging for a moment. “You weren’t certain?!”

“Nope, now stop complaining and focus. Look around. This place just got worse.”

Fowl focused on the surroundings and saw what Max was talking about.

They were in a canyon that opened up to about fifty yards across and ran straight as far as their eyes could see. Walls of stone reached twenty-five yards above them, running the entire length of the canyon.

“This is bad,” Fowl muttered. “What’s the odds we can make it through here?”

Max looked at Tanila, and the two stared at the path ahead.

“There is nowhere to run once we start,” Tanila stated as she checked the blue portal behind them. “We’re boxed in, but even worse, we don’t know how long this thing goes. I’d assume the demons only get worse as we continue.”

“If the walls don't get wider, I can sense most of the area around it with my sonar,” Max said, “but there will still be fifteen yards between what I can feel right now. That leaves a lot of potential for them to surround us, especially since I have no doubt there are more that can stealth.”

“Are they portaling in?” Batrire asked.

“I don’t think so. I would assume it will be visible if the demons do, but then again, who knows.”

Tanila nodded in agreement with Max’s statement.

“It’s a shame those walls are so high.”

Max looked at Fowl and frowned. “Why is that important?”

Shrugging, Fowl pointed at the top of them. “If they weren’t, perhaps you could have jumped and looked from up there.”

Looking at where his dwarven friend was pointing, Max chuckled and then laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Fowl asked.

“If you weren’t ugly, I’d kiss you,” Max replied, turning to face Batrire. “You got that pouch of rope?”

“I do… why?” she replied, her words long and drawn out.

Nodding, he turned to Tanila. “I’m going to jump. Tell me how high I can actually get.”

“Seth, what? Why?” she shouted as Max ran to the edge of the wall and bent down, preparing to jump.

“Just do it!”

Max landed on the ground, leaping as high as he could, surprised at how high he felt he had gone. “Once more!”

He jumped again and gave everything he had, then felt a slight shock from the impact. Turning, he saw the three of them staring at him. Fowl’s mouth was open, and even Tanila’s eyes were wider than usual.

“How high?”

“Hah, you’re not even halfway. Maybe twenty feet if lucky!” Fowl said. “I guess a human can jump.”

“Tanila?” Max asked, ignoring Fowl and his joke.

“He’s right. Maybe twenty feet tops, most likely eighteen. Why?”

Bending down, he drew a rectangle in the dirt. “Okay, listen. This sounds stupid, but maybe it will work.”

Smiling, Max cast a wall of air fifteen feet into the air and jumped, grabbing onto the edge of it and pulling himself up.

“If he dies, I get his stuff,” Fowl muttered as they watched a few yards away.

“Ok, you’re up!”

“Remind me I’m dating a crazy man,” Tanila said as she created a wall of air fifteen feet above the one Max was standing on.

He took a step and jumped, grabbing onto it and pulling himself again. His smile was so wide that they could see the white part of his teeth even over thirty feet above them.

“Now, the stone one!”

“Crazy and stupid,” Batrire muttered as Tanila summoned a stone wall from the edge of the wall.

Stepping again, he leaped into the air and caught the edge of the stone wall with both hands, pulling himself up smoothly and onto it. Glancing at the distance left, Max frowned. Fowl’s measurement of the wall's height was off, but he wasn’t going to give up. Summoning his stone wall slightly higher, Max leaped, grabbing on with both hands, but his left hand slipped off, leaving him dangling by just his right one.

Grunting, he reached up and got both hands on it, pulling himself to the top of his stone section.

“He’s short,” Tanila said with a groan.

“We know, dear, but there’s nothing wrong with dating a short guy. Look at Fowl.”

Tanila groaned and shook her head, ignoring Batrire’s comment. “No… he is short. The distance he hoped for is off.”

“By at least a yard. Maybe two.” Fowl stated.

Max knew time was his weakest enemy. The walls wouldn’t last forever, and if he fell, he’d have to use his skills to prevent himself from possibly killing himself.

Pulling his halberd out, Max looked at the distance from the edge of the axe blade and the bottom of his shaft.

“Guess I’ll try and do something stupid,” he muttered.

Facing the wall, holding his halberd in his right hand at the bottom of it, Max lept upward, swinging the blade and trying to catch it on the edge.

It caught for a second before coming free, and he fell backward, slamming into the stone wall beneath him and almost rolling off the side.

A shout from below came, and Max ignored it. He could see them watching and knew they thought he was an idiot for what he was doing, but he didn’t have a choice. The other dungeons had weaknesses. This one had to have one too.

“Air wall down!”

Rising to his feet, Max set his feet and jumped again. The tip of his blade caught on the edge, and he slammed gently into the stone wall, hanging by his right hand. Giving a small bounce with his body, the blade didn’t move. Quickly, he reached up with his left hand, pulling himself up and getting a hand on the edge of the wall. Carefully, Max swung his leg and side over, taking a deep breath and being glad that the wall wasn’t only a foot or two wide.

Standing up and putting his weapon away, Max stared at the massive wall that seemed to run forever on both sides, except for the single line that ran through it like a river.

Smiling, he yanked the rope from his dimensional storage.

“Gods, I can’t believe you did it,” Fowl muttered, looking at the stone that seemed to have no end.

“I’m guessing we get down the same way?” Tanila asked as she watched Max put the rope back into the special pouch.

“That’s the plan. I still have a spike, and those troll clubs should work to drive it in.”

They gave the chasm a wide berth, trying to make sure that nothing possibly noticed them. They jogged slightly, staying tight as they ran. The overhead sky seemed angry, flashes of red and black appearing as they moved along the wall.

“This thing goes on forever,” Batrire said between even breaths. “Miles… imagine fighting this entire way.”

“Glad I’m dating a genius,” Tanila said, earning a few chuckles from everyone but Max.

“You ready for this?” Max asked as he looked at the portal below.

“Warriors first,” Tanila said with a smile.

Grabbing the rope he had tied to the spike, Max smiled and moved to the edge, wrapping his feet around it. With his chain gloves, he quickly slid down it without a problem.

He rolled as he hit the bottom, pulling his weapon out and swinging his halberd.

A loud clang came as he struck the creature that had been stealthed, revealing a black demon covered in skin that looked like metal.

Its eyes glowed yellow, and both of its arms slashed at Max, each over four feet long and built like a sword.

Dodging and parrying, Max began a dance of death, trying to fight and keep the creature at bay.

This was guarding the portal from behind...

Unable to detect any other demons, Max tried to stay in the same area, not risking going deeper into the cavern they had evaded.

The creature shrieked loudly, and the sound of more came from behind.

“HURRY!”

Max shouted, giving up on his original plan and moving closer to the portal.

He saw the other three starting to descend, each one going as quickly as possible as Max sensed a second and then third creature coming from the other side of the portal.

Casting Ice Nova, he moved toward them, doing what he could to draw them away from his friends.

He saw Fowl coming, shield and hammer out, preparing to assist. “NO! Get them in!”

His ice spell went off, coating the area in a shimmer of ice, breaking the stealth of three more creatures coming toward him.

The beast he fought screamed again, slightly slower from the spell but not near enough. Its blades moved with dazzling speed, and Max felt that it was closer to his own dexterity than he had thought.

“Seth!”

“GO!”

Fowl was pushing the two women toward the portal, knowing Max would come as soon as they were inside.

A thrust from behind slid across the edge of his body, and Max felt pain and weakness take over. He almost tripped as his body nearly gave out.

“Go!” he shouted again, his weapon catching the creature behind him and lifting its head off.

[159 Hitpoints Consumed]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Skill does not match entity type]

[Consume is adjusting skill]

[Would you like to learn [Weakness]?]

[Yes / No]

He was surrounded, and whatever he had been hit with made moving difficult. The portal was only a dozen yards away, but in front of it was the black demon, blocking his way, no longer attacking but allowing its prey to be pinned in.

His friends were safe. They had made it inside the portal.

The black demon suddenly laughed, waving its sword-like arms around in circles.

“You shall die,” the black demon hissed, an evil grin spreading across its face.

Max groaned, his head hurting and his body aching.

“Not if I kill you first,” Max growled.

The demon roared in laughter, laying its head back. Its voice bounced off the walls all around the cavern. Max could feel more creatures coming inside the detection area for his sonar.

There is no one here to hurt, only those seeking to kill you. Let me have a little fun.

Max saw what was around him. More were coming every second, and the ground was beginning to rumble from something coming up behind.

You can try this on your own, but you might not make it.

Max grinned at the demon whose black teeth were dripping with black liquid. Then he let himself go.

You can come out to play…

The laughter inside his own head throbbed.

I thought you’d never ask.

A NOTE FROM DADS BEDTIME STORIES

One of my author buddies who I've read most of his stuff (and he writes a lot) dropped a new story on Amazon.

If you like summoner class stories or just good stuff in general - give it a read!

155 - Who Hunts Who

155 - Who Hunts Who - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

Max gave in, letting the wall he held back the desire that always wanted to be free come tumbling down.

Knowledge and something overwhelming filled his mind, but none of it mattered. He felt himself pushed back, and the presence inside took control.

[Consume is cleansing Weakness Curse]

[Weakness Curse Cleansed]

[Berserker]

[Weakness]

The world seemed to slow down as Max’s halberd whipped through the air, the axe blade slashing at the guardian of the portal.

Those yellow eyes went wide, and it tried to move back, bringing up both arms to block the attack, his blade shearing through each of them, cutting off over two feet of the demon’s blades.

It roared, and movement from around Max rushed toward him, but he did nothing except watch his weapon come around, the butt of the staff slamming into the demon’s side, cracking its armored skin, and ripping a chunk out.

His ice spell went off, and Max didn’t even realize it had been cast. Ice rippled from around him, revealing a dozen Stealthed demons, but its true purpose was the creature he faced.

It roared, an aura coming from its body, yet it washed over Max like a gentle rain, doing nothing as the blade of his weapon came around again, slicing halfway through the demon’s neck.

The demon cried out, trying to hold its head in place with a hand, unable to stop the speed and power of Max's attack. Less than three seconds later, its head was gone, and power flooded through him.

Max’s halberd swung around as the skill that desired this moment spun like a top, the blade carving through limbs and heads like a thresher during the wheat harvest. Every swing of his weapon harvested at least one head or cut multiple demons down.

Roars, cries, and abilities were going off, all trying to stop the man tearing through their gathered forces. Some demons froze in place, unsure what was happening as Max rushed toward the four twelve-foot demons, each with six arms and holding a sword in each hand. Two heads, each with six eyes and two mouths, said things he couldn’t understand, the pack of four coming at him with their blades.

As one the four moved, twenty-four swords came at him in various combo attacks, and Max knew there was a sneer on his face. He could feel contempt flowing through him. As if this wasn’t a challenge.

His body moved in ways he hadn’t yet realized it was capable of leaping, twisting in midair, his weapon parrying a strike, and using the force to push him closer to the first of the demons. In a single breath, his blade had swung out, taking off both heads in a single strike. His foot found purchase on an extended arm, leaping toward the next one.

Max felt a calm in the middle of what would normally have a person pissing their pants.

A wall of air appeared beneath his feet, allowing him to jump and twist, now over and behind the next demon, seeing their red eyes go wide as the blade took their soul in an instant.

Everywhere he turned, the demons fell, parts littering the dirt and black blood covering the chasm as if it was bubbling up from under the dirt.

Demons cast spells at him, and when they managed to land, their effects rarely worked. The damage caused was minor, gone in moments as his skill cleansed them from him. The weaker creatures, having hidden behind the stronger demons, expecting protection, fell so quickly that Max almost wondered if they were real. The demons weren't a threat like a twenty-one-year-old picking on a six-year-old.

Time passed without end, and Max watched as the beast inside him chased down the demons that realized they were now the prey. Something far greater than them had entered their domain, hungry and consuming anything in its path.

During one of the many fights, Max saw a brief flicker of blue light far off in the distance and realized they were moving farther from the portal.

We need to go back!

NO! We need to kill them all! We need the power they provide!

A battle of wills took place, and Max fought against it. Like a man who had been starving and an endless table of food placed before them, gorging themselves to no end, tearing away the famished beast inside wasn't easy.

I need to help my friends! We cannot stay here!

A dagger pierced his side, and pain roared through him.

His will gave in, and his hand swung around, decapitating the demon that had thought it would attack when Max had suddenly stopped moving.

The demons still around backed up, moving to the edges of the walls. Some tried to climb, digging their claws or weapons into the stone, seeking escape.

We need more power for what is coming! You need more power!

None of it matters if my family dies!

A roar and scream so primal and angry came from his mouth. A wave of anger, frustration, and hunger flooded the area he was in. Every demon within its range ran, fear gripping a being most wouldn't believe could know fear.

His side still burned, and suddenly, Max felt himself running forward toward the portal but slightly to the side. Demons along the wall became Max's preferred way to heal.

Unable to flee, they tried to fight back, finding their weapons or body too weak to stop the attacks that cut them into pieces.

Max found himself suddenly near the portal.

He could see his body, covered in black blood and dripping from how covered he was.

Very well. You have given me my fill for now. The next part falls upon you.

Max stumbled for a moment. His body returned to his control, and he snapped his head up. He tried to ignore the mass number of notifications vying for his attention.

Nothing mattered more than the portal.

Rushing through, he prayed his friends were still alive.

"Where were you?!" Fowl shouted.

“Are you ok?” Batrire asked, even though she could see Max’s health bar was full.

Tanila just rushed him, throwing her arms around him, ignoring the blood that had covered him from head to toe.

“I was worried,” she whispered.

Max hugged her back, holding her tight and trying not to crush her as he did.

After a moment, he let go, stepping back and looking at Fowl and Batrire.

“I’m ok. I had to let go… Bo… I needed my skill to help, and it did… I’m not certain how many things I killed, but…”

He saw the notifications and finally paid them attention.

[6 Strength Consumed]

[6 Constitution Consumed]

[6 Dexterity Consumed]

[6 Dexterity Consumed]

[6 Dexterity Consumed]

[6 Dexterity Consumed]

[6 Dexterity Consumed]

[6 Strength Consumed]

[6 Strength Consumed]

[6 Constitution Consumed]

[6 Dexterity Consumed]

[6 Constitution Consumed]

[6 Strength Consumed]

[6 Constitution Consumed]

[1 Strength Consumed]

[6 Intelligence Consumed]

[6 Wisdom Consumed]

[6 Intelligence Consumed]

[6 Wisdom Consumed]

[6 Intelligence Consumed]

[6 Wisdom Consumed]

[6 Intelligence Consumed]

[6 Wisdom Consumed]

[6 Intelligence Consumed]

[6 Wisdom Consumed]

[6 Intelligence Consumed]

[6 Wisdom Consumed]

[3 Intelligence Consumed]

[6 Wisdom Consumed]

[5 Wisdom Consumed]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Unable to Obtain Skill - Power Saved]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Unable to Obtain Skill - Power Saved]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill

[Unable to Obtain Skill - Power Saved]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Would you like to learn [Demonic Magic]?]

[Yes / No]

[Demonic Magic - Rare Successfully learned]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Would you like to learn [Demonic Summoning]?]

[Yes / No]

[Demonic Summoning - Rare Successfully learned]

Max stood there, his brain trying to comprehend what had just happened.

“Seth!”

“Seth!”

Even though Tanila called his name multiple times, Max finally found the ability to focus on her only when she touched his cheek, ignoring the filth on him.

“Sorry… I… I just saw the results of the battle,” Max said, his voice matching the stunned look on his face.

“Dare I ask?”

“Give me a second, and I’ll find out the base numbers.”

[Base Stats Check]

*****

Max Hoste

18-Year-old Human Male

Level 1

Exp 1/1000

Demonic Essences: 273

STR: 115

DEX: 115

CON: 115

INT: 95

WIS: 95

*****

“Impossible,” Fowl muttered. “And that’s your base…”

“How do you feel? Not physically but inside?” Tanila asked, a slight frown and look of concern on her face.

“I’m okay,” Max answered, trying to smile and assure her he was fine. “My options were limited, and we both knew it. I couldn’t get past the guardian of the portal that was hiding. I might have tried with the skills on my own, but there was no way I thought it would have worked.”

Max looked at Batrire and saw her frowning at him.

“I was cursed and weakened, and there wasn’t time for me to drink a potion and hope everything would be okay. My skill… It removed the negative effects, like it had the red aura. After that, I realized just how much I lack when understanding how to fight.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Fowl asked. “You’re one of the best fighters I’ve seen. What do you mean you lack in fighting?”

Max chuckled and put his hand in front of him. He then ran his fingers across the top. “I actually ran along a sword that was coming at me. I jumped on an air wall I created

for the specific purpose of getting behind an enemy. My skill used the momentum of the demon's attacks to propel me where I needed to be.”

Shaking his head and trying to understand, Fowl muttered to himself. “I can’t imagine… and skills?”

Max nodded. “Let’s not worry about those right now. Am I seeing this dungeon correctly?”

Grunting, Fowl nodded and turned to the dungeon Max was now focused on.

“Where’s the boss? It’s empty…”

“We haven’t looked very hard,” Tanila said, gently pushing Max. “Every one of us was more focused when you might return.”

Bobbing his head, Max looked at the space just a few yards from the portal behind him.

Two massive metal doors, thicker than five feet and fifty feet tall, appeared ready to close behind them once they walked onto the grey stone tile that ran the length of the two-hundred-yard colosseum.

“It looks… almost like the one back in Peltagow,” Max muttered. “The walls are taller, but the rest, including the box where the queens sat, are almost identical. Why?”

“He’s right,” Batrire said. “I hadn’t noticed until Seth pointed that out.”

“We need not worry about that part, but what happens once we go past those doors?” Tanila pointed out. “I’m certain we won't be able to open them, and we’ll be trapped inside if they actually close behind us.”

No noise came from inside, and as the four of them tried to consider the next path after dealing with Max showing up and how he looked and what he had done, a loud bell tolled, and a timer appeared in the center of the air.

“One minute?” Fowl asked. “Till?”

“The doors close or the demon comes. Either way, we need to decide fast if you three are still ok with going forward,” Max said as he pointed at the huge doors.

“They're moving!” Batrire gasped.

“Judging by how slow they are, we have fifty seconds at best to pass them. I’m okay going on. What about you, Fowl?” Tanila asked.

“Don’t put this on me,” he grunted, motioning to the doors. “I’ll follow Seth wherever. We just need to hurry up and decide.”

“Ogre nuts, Fowl!” Batrire cursed. “Grow a pair and decide before the door shuts!”

Max heard Fowl start to curse, but the dwarf stopped himself and moved toward the closing doors.

“Let’s go!”

Max brought up the rear, waiting for Tanila and Batrire to catch up to their dwarven friend who stood on the tiles of the colosseum floor.

The timer reached the last ten seconds, and the doors were almost shut, leaving no room to return to the portal, the blue escape point hidden from their sight.

As the timer hit zero, the doors shut completely with an earth-shaking impact. They felt them close and heard something click inside.

Then laughter echoed in the arena all around them.

“Shite, this can’t be good,” Fowl muttered as portals began to open all over the seats of the Colosseum.

156 - The Demon Champion

The four moved closer together, shuffling further along the tile floor to see what was around them.

Seats were filling up with demons of every kind, some like the ones they had fought, many like those Max had butchered, and yet even more, none had ever seen or imagined poured through portals.

“What is this?” Batrire whispered, her voice trembling slightly.

“I have no idea,” Tanila replied. “Nothing I have heard or read in the history of our people speaks of anything like this. Surely we cannot have been lied to…”

“Greetings mortals!” a voice boomed all around them. It sounded like an old man who could barely breathe, raspy and sending a shudder down their spine. “You have made it where none have in so long. Welcome to your death!”

Noises came from the demons surrounding them, and the tone suggested they were laughing and cheering at the message they had just heard.

A bell sounded, and the crowd of demons went silent. Then, a massive twenty-foot portal opened up across the arena where the spot nobility would usually watch from.

From it came a demon that looked like a man. A single massive eyeball, red in nature, covered the top front half of its head, and a single mouth with teeth so large they could make out the details from across the distance.

Its body looked armored like one Max had fought. Purple and black colors meshed together with the occasional line of red around the armored pieces of its skin.

Two large wings folded up along its back, the same black-purple swirled pattern appearing on the parts they could see.

“It has to be at least twenty feet tall,” Fowl said quietly. “Is that what we are going to fight?”

The demon who had just come from the portal started to laugh, its voice filling their ears and the Colosseum. It felt like someone dragging nails along a chalkboard, making them all wince as it vibrated through their body.

“You are not worthy to face me,” the demon said, its mouth never moving, but still, its words rang out across the Colosseum. “No, rules do not allow it… instead, you must fight one of mine who seeks to prove their worth… I am saddened by how you cheated my children.”

Max saw Fowl look at him and make a rope-climbing motion.

“Yes! You used brains when most would use brawn… very rare… rare indeed. And when you were surrounded, and your friends fled, you alone stood to fight.”

Suddenly, the demon was on the floor twenty yards away, gone from its previous spot and now peering down at them.

Max immediately leveled his weapon toward the demon.

“Put that toy away, or you will find I am not like my children at all. The rules say I cannot fight you, but if you were foolish enough to attack after I have warned you, it would be within my right to strike you down.”

“What rules?” Max shouted.

Rules established long before you can imagine…

The demon peered at Max, its head shifting side to side.

“You are different… stronger… much stronger than you should be to be in here, and yet,” it turned its eye upon the other three for a moment. “They too are stronger than those I have seen in so long. Are the adventurers of this world getting stronger?”

“Tell us, demon, what is your name.”

The demon laughed, pointing its finger at Tanila. A long, curved fingernail that looked sharper than any weapon the four of them had ever seen flicked around in the air as it drew a rune in the air.

Suddenly, Tanila’s hair changed color to her glowing golden form, and her eyes shone with the light that only came from one of her bloodline.

“A princess!” the demon hissed in delight, the crowd of demons echoing a similar noise as their leader. “It has been eons since one risked their life here! Tell me, why have you come?!”

Max watched as Tanila took a few steps toward the demon. Her posture had changed. Her shoulders were back, and her head held high. It seemed like minor things until he felt the aura she gave off. One of authority.

“We have come to challenge the boss of this floor. To claim the prize for those who defeat it so we can climb the tower with its boon. Do you deny us this chance?”

A hiss came from the lord of the arena, making a fist and digging its own nails into the palms of its hand. Blood seeped down onto the floor, black droplets that hissed and burned as the tile where they fell began to melt away.

“You are brave and foolish!” it growled. “If I was not bound–”

“But you are!” Tanila shouted, cutting off the demon as he spoke. “Bound by rules that cannot be changed. Now, where is the demon we must face and defeat to claim our boon?”

Like an animal held back by a chain, the demon leaned forward, its throat vibrating as it growled. Every ounce of its attention was upon Tanila. Slowly, it extended a finger once more at her.

“I have selected one for you to fight. If you defeat it, you shall gain the promised boon. When you die, however, your soul will be mine to torment for eternity.”

Tanila rolled her eyes, turning her back and moving to join her party.

Max watched as the demon tried to reach out, angered by how she ignored him. Its hand seemed to run into a wall a few yards before it reached Tanila.

It hissed and howled, snarling as it yanked its hand back.

“Prepare yourselves. The timer will begin.”

It vanished, back to the space where its portal had appeared, reclining on a stone seat that fit its massive size.

A timer appeared above them, thirty seconds on the clock.

“Buffing,” Batrire said as she cast her spell.

“Tell me what we’re doing. I can’t see what we’re fighting yet!”

“Just get ready,” Max said, nervously checking the room. Whatever we fight, I doubt it comes until the timer is gone.”

Max shifted slightly, checking on Tanila and Batrire, motioning for them to get in the middle.

“Have that taunt ready.”

Fowl grunted, and when ten seconds remained, the crowd of demons started counting the time off.

The colosseum vibrated as the demons counted down the last three seconds, and when the timer hit zero, a standard-size portal appeared on the other side, close to the one in charge of this dungeon.

From it came a demon that looked more human than the others. Its body was built like a muscular woman, skin red and seemingly on fire, yet every muscle could be seen as she moved. A tail reached from its backside, running to the ground, something on the end, but they couldn’t tell from this distance.

Horns appeared, not large ones, on her head, and the demon carried a flaming sword and shield.

You are outclassed. What I sense from this demon is beyond what you should face. I cannot promise that the lord of this dungeon has broken a

rule, and I cannot fight for you now… had I only known what lay beyond that portal, I would have made you fight on your own.

What do you mean you cannot fight? What changed?!

After you took control back, there is a period of time between when I can be given the reigns… there is not enough time for that to happen, so… I will expend the power I stored to help as much as possible.

[Consume has Reset All Abilities]

[Stored Power has Decreased]

Max blinked twice, seeing the notification and knowing what it possibly meant.

Focus, she is coming.

Like an arrow, the demon had come at them, blazing across the tiles like a projectile.

Max had missed her bowing to her lord as he had conversed with his skill. Pulling his shield from storage, Max calculated the time before the demon arrived.

“Seven seconds!”

He began to prepare his ice spell when suddenly the demon vanished.

“Where the–”

Fowl’s cursing was cut off as Max sensed the demon behind Tanila coming from a portal appearing in the air.

Lunging forward, he felt the new speed and strength in his legs as he covered the few steps in a moment, shield out ahead.

Instead of an attack through Tanila’s heart, the fire blade scraped against the shield, flames appearing as the sword pierced her left shoulder, coming through the front of her chest below her collarbone.

Max drove his weapon at the demon as she began to come through the portal, forcing her to jump back and pull its sword from where it had almost killed the woman he loved.

Applause rang out as the demons saw their champion score the first hit, almost killing one in the process.

Tanila fell to the ground, screaming in agony, and Batrire didn’t hesitate, healing as their friend's health bar plummeted to half.

The demon grinned at Max, using her shield to push away his weapon while bringing her sword at Max’s head.

She was slightly faster than him, but Max knew her sword skill was equal to his weapon mastery. He could read the movement, see it coming, and deftly blocked it, kicking with his leg as she came close.

Max saw the demon blink in surprise as his foot caught her knee, buckling it for a second. Then, snapping back, the flaming sword cut downward, trying to cut it off.

His mind raced as they traded jabs and attacks, each parrying or blocking the other with no successful attack landing.

She began to back up, and as Max started to give chase, he heard a warning.

Don't! Don't chase. Stay close to your allies. It's a trap!

Max froze for a heartbeat, backing up as the demon took two more steps, frowning when he didn't pursue.

"Afraid?" she taunted, waving her shield and sword.

Fowl started to rush past him, and Max held out his weapon, catching the dwarf.

"Stay back, protect Batrire, eyes on her back.!"

Coughing once from the impact, Fowl turned and moved to Batrire's backside, almost backing up to her.

The demon's eyes seemed to burn with anger and fury.

"How?! How do you know?!"

Max's brain knew the answer in a moment.

"Your portal trick won't work against us," he replied. Smiling when he saw the demon glare and snarl even more.

"Drink it!"

Max heard Batrire's voice but didn't need to look back. He could feel and see her giving the elf a potion.

"Cursed?" Max asked, not taking his eyes off the demon who seemed frustrated at its prey not playing the game it wanted.

"Yes," Tanila moaned. Her voice was weak, and Max could feel her heartbeat was weak.

As the potion was consumed, Max sensed how Tanila's body began to recover, and when she stood up, Max could sense the anger coming from Tanila.

"She's mine," their mage growled.

Max saw the demon look concerned for the first time since the fight started. It took another step back, and as Tanila's Ice Nova went off, the demon quickly vanished backward through a portal.

"Be ready!"

Max scanned the room with his eyes, letting his sonar guide him.

The demon sword appeared again, and Max began casting his Ice Nova.

“Up!”

Above them, the demon came, plummeting from a few yards above toward Batrire.

Fowl didn’t hesitate.

He cast taunt and watched as the sword that had been going for his greatest treasure in all the world turned to him. Rage and anger filled the eyes of the demon, forced to attack even though she didn’t want to.

Her sword struck his shield, and the blade glanced off but not without striking back.

A few drops of black blood flowed down her arm as Fowl’s new skill took effect.

Whatever damage she hit with must have been massive to cause that much to her…

His spell went off as the demon landed, sword swinging again at the dwarven tank.

Dashing toward the demon, Max dashed toward her, swinging his blade while she was forced to focus on Fowl.

The blade slashed against her back, hitting a hard outer shell that cracked slightly, and a little more blood seeped from the wound, but nothing vital was done.

She turned, enveloped by Max’s spell, injured from the three attacks Fowl had parried and having suffered a blow to her back.

“Down!”

Ice began to form at the demon’s feet, and Max smiled as he swung again.

[Power Strike]

The demon flashed red. Her eyes saw his blade coming, and her shield somehow moved to where it was headed, even though she shouldn’t have been able to turn like she did.

His weapon collided with the shield.

A loud noise reverberated through his head, and Max felt himself flying backward.

[Regeneration]

His mind swirled, trying to figure out what had happened.

Warm liquid ran down his whole body, and Max tried to sit up but couldn’t.

Lifting his head up slightly from the ground, Max saw that his arms and legs were shattered, his whole body crushed somehow.

Laughter echoed through the Colosseum as he lay there unable to move.

“Healing!”

The world swirled, and blackness fought to take over.

Am I going to die?

157 - Fighting as One

[157 - Fighting as One - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Max wanted to pass out, but his mind wouldn't let him. The pain was excruciating as every bone in his body felt like it had been shattered.

Regeneration was working quickly, and tiny pieces of bone rejoined where needed. A heal flooded over Max, and he felt air finally fill his lungs as he tried to breathe, wishing he hadn't, as the pain of it almost made him black out.

Trying to lift his head again, Max saw the demon was snarling. Its body was encased in ice that was melting quickly. It still held her as the three members of his party raced toward him.

"Seth!"

Grateful his ears worked, Max nodded and winced at doing so.

Talina thrust a potion into his mouth, and he drank. The foul taste of a healing potion didn't bother him as his body quickly accelerated the knitting of his bones together.

Popping sounds came as he felt joints reattach and move back into place.

"Talina!" Fowl shouted.

"On it!"

He could see her casting but wasn't sure what it was.

"A little more," Max groaned. "Almost ready."

The worst part came when his lower body joined, each socket, joint, and bone, moving to where they needed to be. He wanted to roar in pain but instead bit his lip, hoping that there was still time.

"She's free!"

Max tried to sit up but couldn't.

A shimmer of light covered him and the others.

"Dome cast!"

The clanging of a sword and howling of a pissed-off demon filled his ears and sonar. Max could sense the dome that Batrire had just cast, buying time for them as he continued to heal.

Over and over, the demon raged against the dome yet couldn't get through. Max then realized the demon no longer had a shield.

Two last popping sounds came as his hip sockets moved into place, and Kaen groaned. He stood to his feet and saw the demon woman step back in shock, sword held off to the side.

“Impossible!” it shrieked. “You should be dead!”

[Regeneration Expired]

Max laughed and pulled two massive axes out of his dimensional storage, each almost as tall as he.

“Ready for round two?” he asked.

“Five seconds,” Batrire said.

The demon hissed and shrieked again, backing up a few steps as Max moved like nothing had happened.

He had glanced over a few yards and saw his halberd. He needed it, but no one could bring it to him. The perks and disadvantages of being bound.

A light shimmered around them as the dome vanished, and a few seconds after it had, Max’s ice spell went off. As it did, the demon began to move back through a portal that he could barely see and sense with his sonar. The more times she used it, the sooner he was starting to detect it.

“Shift right!”

The group moved without hesitation, keeping close and an eye out for the demon. She appeared twenty yards away, looking at them with frustration and anger.

Max quickly swapped out one of the axes as he picked up his halberd. Glancing around, he saw his shield was a few yards toward the demon. Putting the other axe away, he motioned to it.

“As a group. We’re winning… not by much, but keep doing what we are doing.”

A few grunts came from everyone and they moved as a unit again, allowing Max to retrieve his shield.

“You going to keep hiding?” Max shouted. “I thought demons were scary and never afraid. Perhaps you should have been on the first floor of this dungeon.”

The demon’s eyes went wide, and when she snarled at Max, every black tooth was visible.

Charging at them, the group got set, preparing for her attack.

“Immobolize then hit!”

The demon blinked out from her charge, and Max spun to the left, shield out and his halberd swinging to catch the demon. She had barely gotten her sword out of the portal when Max was already on her, knocking her blade down and chopping at her wrist with his weapon.

Unable to stop the momentum of her charge, the demon surged forward more, exposing her forearm, which had armored skin. Max’s blade cut about an inch into

the demon’s forearm, blood pouring from the wound, and the thick protective layer shattered.

Howling in pain and anger, the demon came through the portal, grabbing Max’s shield with her free hand. Max stored his weapon, holding onto the demon’s clawed hand as it tried to yank his shield from him.

[Weakness]

[Festering Touch]

A fire burnt his skin as they touched, and searing pain shot through his fingers as he held tight, conveying the skills he had gotten.

[Regeneration]

The demon tried to yank its left arm back and failed, stumbling as she did, weakened by the effects Max had inflicted on her.

Ice again formed at her feet, beginning to lock her in place.

Letting go of the demon, Max stepped back, an ice spear forming and preparing to launch at the enemy they were overcoming slowly.

He sensed Talina’s ice spear growing in the air near her. Max nodded as his hand healed, and he could finally grab his weapon from storage.

Both ice spears flew forward, and the demon woman raised her sword, blocking Talina’s spell. Shards of ice pelted her and melted upon contact with the unholy, flaming skin.

Max’s ice spear hit, piercing her shoulder a few inches.

The sword sliced, cutting the spear loose from her body, and she yanked out the frozen piece of magic only to see Max’s weapon coming for her head.

Her body flashed black, and her sword moved instantly. She parried his blow and forced it to the side.

Without missing a beat, Max used that momentum. She was trapped, so he spun and chopped down again at the demon. The fire sword clashed again, deflecting the blow as the demon struggled to stay standing, only held in place by the ice that still constricted her movements.

Two more attacks came, and each one was successfully deflected. The ice was melting from her prison, and Max smiled as his weapon came around once more, wondering if he was right about the ability the demon was using.

She began to try and dodge, the ice cracking and falling off when it suddenly grew back into place.

Her eyes glanced at the prison rising up, taking her eyes off his blade as it came down. Her body flashed black, and the impact of Max’s halberd against her sword drove her arm down, exposing her body.

[Rampage]

His weapon moved quickly, defying everything he knew except that magic was real. The first attack struck the demon’s neck, shattering the raised skin that acted like armor.

The demon groaned and slammed down into the prison that was holding her fast but was unable to get her sword up as the second strike hit in the same spot, the axe blade sinking through the armored body part and cutting inches into her neck.

Max roared as the third strike came, wishing he still had his Power Strike. Max’s eyes tracked his weapon as it sliced into the middle of the demon's neck. The blade connected with its spine, sending the demon to the right, the impact forcing her downward.

Another icebolt struck, burying itself deep inside the demon's right shoulder. A cracking sound came as it tried to raise the sword but was unable to.

Like an enraged animal, Max stored his shield as he swung again, both hands grabbing onto the shaft. He swung again, connecting once more with the same wound that was gushing black blood like a bubbling spring.

His voice echoed in his ears as he roared, angry, upset, pissed.

Like a lumberjack trying to fall a tree, his blade hit over and over in the same spot until it didn’t, the head tumbling off the body.

“Seth!”

Talina’s voice caught him as he was about to strike the empty spot again, not yet realizing he had already removed the head.

The colosseum was silent as the light in the demon’s eyes dimmed and went dark. The body began to fade.

And then Max began to shake. Cold power roared through him, and he couldn’t control the energy that filled him.

[5 Strength Consumed]

[5 Constitution Consumed]

[68 Demonic Essence Collected]

[Consume has successfully Consumed a skill]

[Skill does not match entity type]

[Consume is adjusting skill]

[Would you like to learn [Demonic Teleportation]?]

[Yes / No]

Yes… well done!

Max tried to ignore the words in his head and fought to breathe, his body still shuddering from whatever he had just consumed.

“Seth…”

He heard Fowl whisper his name and saw the female demon’s body fading into nothing, small black particles floating upward before vanishing.

“IMPOSSIBLE!”

The shout caused Max to wince. The volume of it felt like it was going to tear his insides apart.

Every seat in the Colosseum was empty. The audience that had cheered for their demise vanished in a moment.

An overwhelming presence appeared before them, the lord of this area staring down at them, breathing heavily through its mouth. Blood from where it had injured itself by chewing on its own face dripped down on the demon’s chest.

“How?!” it roared. “How can you be so strong?! Are you here to test me? Is this to make sure I still obey the rules?!”

Max turned, putting his weapon up and turned to face the massive demon, who took a step back when he moved closer to it.

“And what if I am?” Max asked, trying to appear as if what had happened had been nothing at all. “Are you willing to break the agreement and suffer the consequences?”

The demon stared at Max and then at Talina until a cough from Batrire forced it to turn and stare at her.

“You are not a party that should be here, and yet you meet all of the requirements set forth,” it said, its voice having lost the pressure it once had. “I will not break the agreement set forth. You four may claim your prize.”

Snapping his finger once, a pedestal rose from the tile floor. Black flesh seemed to make up the base, pulsating as it formed. Once it had stopped moving, the demon lord moved near it and scowled at them. It plunged its hand into its chest and pulled out a massive red gem, setting it on the black pedestal, and then took a step back.

The blood that had covered it drained quickly to the base, leaving the red gem sparkling in the fighting area of the Colosseum.

Moving toward it, Max slowly held his hand out.

Don’t! Something is wrong…

Max cocked his head, looking at the stone his fingers were only inches away from.

Pulling his fingers back, he turned and stared at the demon watching him.

“What is this?” Max asked. “A trap?”

The faintest movement of the demon’s eye and the eyelid covering it caught Max’s attention.

“Perhaps you are wanting to break the agreement and–”

“Enough!” the demon said, growling as it reached out, picking up the gem and then drawing a rune. The color changed from red to a soft yellow color. As it did, smoke and a hissing sound came from where the demon held it in his fingers. Quickly, he set it down on the pillar and backed away.

“Forgive me… I will not interfere again.”

Max saw how the demon moved. It was nervous and scared.

Why is it acting like that?

You defeated something it knows no average person allowed in this test can. I then warned you of a trap, again something no one should know of unless they are something they shouldn’t be. Hold your hand close, and I will see if it is safe.

Max moved back to the crystal and held his hand out, keeping it inches from the gem.

You may touch it.

“Talina, Fowl, Batrire. Come and touch the orb. We will do it all at the same time.”

Max turned to the demon and shook his head.

When all four of them were close, and they all had their hands out, Max nodded.

Something flowed from inside the gem and into each of them, bathing them in a warm light.

[Defense of the Demon Acquired]

Each of them smiled, nodding that they had gotten the buff.

Turning to Talina, Max tapped his hair and then his eyes.

She nodded, her eyes going wide as she realized what he was pointing out. After working her bracer, she adjusted her hair and eye color back to their previous state.

Max pointed at the door as he looked at the demon, who had not taken its eye off him. It snapped its finger, and the doors vanished, showing the portal awaiting them.

With a nod, Max motioned to the others, and they walked toward the exit.

When they got there, Max motioned for them to all leave and turned, seeing the demon still staring at him.

“Do not try and cheat the rules again!” Max shouted. “The consequences might be some you don’t want to face.”

Stepping back into the portal, Max heard a roar of anger and hate.

“I shall find you–”

158 - Valuable Information

158 - Valuable Information - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

“I’m sorry to see you four are back so soon,” the guard stated, frowning slightly. “Still, I am glad you didn’t die inside.”

Max looked at the other three, who were all nodding slowly.

“It was a lot scarier than we had imagined,” Tanila said.

The female guard chuckled and nodded, pulling out her notes and writing something down.

“Still, thirty minutes is longer than most. The reports say that in the past, the few who have attempted are back within a minute. It seems you were at least braver than them.”

Nodding slowly, Max realized that time was obviously different in this dungeon than in the others.

“Well, at least we tried,” Max said, motioning to Fowl, who looked perplexed.

As they walked down the hallway, Fowl started to ask a question when Batrire gave him a gentle hip check. “Wait till the carriage, my love. Then we’ll talk.”

“So you’re telling me it was only thirty minutes outside the dungeon?” Fowl asked. “How is that possible?”

“Dimensional magic,” Tanila muttered, still flipping through a book she had pulled from a backpack in her storage. “I’m certain I read something about that in one of these books.”

“These books,” Max mocked as he leaned over, trying to read some of the elvish language written on the pages. “How many of *these books* do you have?”

“Enough,” Tanila replied. “Now, give me a moment. I think I’m near where I remember it being mentioned.”

“But we did complete it,” Fowl said. “I have the boon listed on my status screen.”

“We all do,” Batrire added, “but I really want to know how you knew the gem when it was red was trapped. Was it your…”

Max nodded. “It’s been different lately. It's not as demanding… like it knows I won’t give in to the power, so it has changed since it evolved. I still need to figure out a lot, but it helped us in that fight.”

“And skills?” Fowl whispered.

Nodding, Max held up his hand while glancing at Tanila, who was still flipping through her book.

[Skill Description - Demonic Magic]

*****

Demonic Magic—Rare Skill: The caster may activate magic from a different realm, unleashing unholy effects and damage. Curses persist for thirty minutes, and a random effect is determined when cast. Damaging bolts of power can be summoned, imparting weakening and other random effects. More information will be given as the ability is used. Requires two demonic essences per spell.

*****

[Skill Description - Demonic Summing]

*****

Demonic Summoning - Rare Skill: The caster may start a ritual to summon a demonic familiar. A successful summoning will result in a bound demon for one hour per fifty base intelligence. The caster must use blood for the summoning. Their own blood will result in a stronger demon, and the more given will also increase the strength of the familiar. Requires twenty demonic essences per summon. Cooldown of two days between summoning.

*****

[Skill Description - Demonic Teleportation]

*****

Demonic Teleportation- Epic Skill: The caster can move through the demonic plane, teleporting within fifteen meters of them. While moving through the plane, all momentum is kept. Some magical barriers will prevent teleportation from going through. Requires one demonic essence per cast. The cooldown is twenty seconds.

*****

Fowl and Batrire sat silently as they watched Max’s face contort and change when he first started reading the descriptions only he could see. Suddenly, his eyes widened, and his mouth opened slightly.

“This is broken,” Max said quietly.

“What is?” Fowl asked, leaning across the small gap in the carriage to get closer to Max.

Tanila put a finger where she was reading and turned to see what Max was talking about.

“Two skills I probably won’t use, though they are interesting. Demonic Magic and Summoning.”

“What?” hissed Tanila . “You have those?”

He saw the look of shock and horror on her face and nodded.

“But how… oh wait, you said you consumed demonic essences, didn’t you?”

Chuckling, Max nodded and leaned over, kissing her on the cheek as she sat there still in disbelief. “You’re smarter than you let on. How you know all this and keep it secret is beyond my imagination.”

“Try growing up in a castle for as long as I did. You’ll be forced to spend many years reading because your parents won’t let you interact with others,” Tanila groaned. “Books were my friend, and my parents' private library is massive.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine that life,” Fowl said. “Being waited on hand and foot, having whatever I want…”

“Never getting love or affection, being pitted against your siblings, being told you need to be strong and willing to use the power given to you by Thuyja. Yup, it's great,” she replied, leveling a glare at the dwarf across the carriage.

Batrire snickered as Fowl held his hands up and leaned back.

“Anyway,” Max continued, trying to help Fowl remove the foot from his mouth, “there is one spell that sounds really interesting: Demonic Teleportation.”

“That’s what the demon used!”

Max nodded at Fowl.

“It has a fifteen-yard range, which isn’t bad. The cost is low—only one essence per cast. The cooldown is pretty low, too—only twenty seconds.”

Tanila was biting her bottom lip as she squinted at him. “That’s a dangerous game, though. It’s a huge ability, but we can’t really show our hand with that. Imagine if someone learns you have that ability along with all your others…”

Groaning, Max nodded as he leaned his head back against the cart wall. “I had forgotten that… a fifth member…”

“We certain this is still the best idea?” Batrire asked. “I mean, is that kind of exposure and risk worth a fifth person?”

Everyone looked at each other, and Max nodded as they stared at him.

“We agreed that the risk could be greater than we anticipate. If we make one mistake, it could result in someone's death. I won’t risk your life when having a person who knows the tower and can help us survive and advance. Has our goal changed from trying to complete the tower?”

Their healer frowned and shook her head slowly. “No… it hasn’t…”

A moment of silence where they all dealt with the truth that they needed help and it would cost them to share their secrets.

“Forget the elf archer we’re getting,” Fowl said. “Do you think you could use that skill to teleport into the bank and steal a bunch of…”

Fowl saw the glare Batrire and Tanila were giving him and slowly stopped talking.

“I doubt it,” Max said with a chuckle. “It won’t let me go through certain magical barriers, so I don’t think the demon could get through Batrire’s dome.”

“That would be too easy, I guess,” Fowl muttered.

“And wrong,” Batrire replied.

“I’m a dwarf. When has taking gold not nailed down or locked up been wrong?”

Sighing, Batrire nodded slowly.

“Anyways,” Max interjected, “when we get to Tom and Everett, we need to tell them what we learned. I’m guessing most keep this stuff secret, which will help with the Faction’s growth. Besides, we need to give back the rings and take a few days for our stuff to come off cooldown.”

“And a bath!” Tanila exclaimed as she continued scanning words in her book. “I need a bath badly.”

Everett was writing as quickly as possible while Max and the others shared what they had experienced and the fight. Tom’s mouth never fully closed as he listened, standing again as he continually sat and stood.

“The demon at the end tried to cheat us, a red gem at the end, but something felt off, and when I challenged him, he gave in, admitted he was breaking some rule or contract, and then fixed it,” Max said. “I’m not certain what has been ordained or set up like it was talked about, but I have so many questions regarding everything I once thought I knew.”

A single grunt came from Tom as he shook his head, peering down at the book Everett was still writing in. It took a few minutes before their Faction leader finished, and he leaned back in his chair, cracking his knuckles and frowning.

“So much of this… I have even more questions now… Like you, there is much about our world I don’t know, and what I do has come with costs I don’t want to discuss.” Everett crossed his arms, and as he shook his head, he took a moment to look at the four of them. “The idea of climbing a dungeon wall, that was brilliant… I mean, I’ve heard of some amazing ways to get past a problem on a dungeon floor, but that…”

“Do you think it will work again?” Tom asked.

“I’m not certain. Still, good use of the spikes, driving them into the wall while Tanila waited for her spells to come off cooldown. That kind of thinking is what I like to hear.”

Max nodded, grinning as he felt Tanila elbow him.

“We’re going to take two days off and then attempt the last dungeon. Anything else we need to know or prepare?” their mage asked.

Tom and Everett shared a look, and both shook their heads.

“With what you just told us, I’m not certain anything we know would be applicable,” Tom informed them. “I’m just glad that those rings and potion worked.”

“And you’re certain it will be almost impossible for most groups of five even?” Everett asked.

“You want me to be truthful, right?”

Snorting, the older man nodded.

“Don’t send people in. It might be easier the next time, but something tells me that the demon in charge of the dungeon has been playing games and trying to skirt some agreement he is under. It might not be as bad in the coming months, but there were a few moments when I wondered if we had made the right choice.”

Grimacing, Tom looked at Everett and shook his head.

“That’s good to know,” Tom replied. “We were considering a team that may be joining our Faction, who are pretty solid. They're only level forty and not leveling as fast as you all did, but we considered it an option.”

“What about our new teammate?” Fowl asked, “Ignoring the current discussion. We were wondering when we would finally meet her.”

“After you get back from the dragon dungeon, we sent in a team to help them, and they will be returning. Word is that they lost a warrior, and things got grim, so… when you all do meet, remember to be gentle. Even though her team had made it past the fourth floor, let their loss serve as a reminder. Death is always around the corner in the tower.”

Batrire grimaced, recalling Max's words an hour or so ago.

“Anything else?”

Tanila rose and nodded at Everett. “Actually, the four of us would like to use the skill stone to select our new skill, if that is okay.”

“You already decided on which ones you’re going to take?” Tom asked. “No need for advice on them?”

Everett chuckled as he watched his friend stammer, realizing they would not take up his offer to help with those choices.

“We’re good, but thank you,” Tanila replied with a kind smile and a slight nod of her head. “As a team, we have done well so far and feel we know what’s best for us.”

Sighing, Tom motioned to the door. “I’ll take them. You can stay here and study your notes.”

Everett nodded and opened the book on his lap. “Be safe, you four. Come see us for anything we can do, and by anything, I mean it.”

Max and the others nodded, moving to follow Tom, who was already halfway to the door.

“I’ll leave you four in here,” Tom said as he opened the thick metal door with two guards standing outside it. “When you're done, just ring that bell on the other side, and they will open the door.”

As they walked into the room, Max felt a twinge of a memory from what felt so long ago.

“You ok?” Tanila asked after the door was shut. “You look… scared.”

Frowning, Max nodded. “The last time I saw one of these, my whole life changed… and I ended up getting knocked unconscious by a woman, hogtied, and thrown into a cart.”

“Well, no cart in here,” Fowl teased, “but perhaps Batrire still has some rope.”

Groaning, Max rolled his eyes and stayed back along the wall, watching the clear crystal from afar. “You three can go ahead, I’m fine right here.”

159 - A Dragon Dungeon

[159 - A Dragon Dungeon - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Max watched as Fowl moved up to the crystal first, putting his hands on it and closing his eyes. The gem glowed momentarily, changing colors until it settled on brown. A flash of light went off, and Fowl stepped back and smiled.

“Done!”

“That fast?” Max asked. “I mean… wow.”

“It’s not hard when you know what you want. Haven’t you tried using the one in the adventurer hall at some point?”

Shaking his head, Max couldn’t take his eye off the now clear crystal. “I was always afraid if I went in and tried to use it, an alarm or something would go off.”

“Nothing has ever happened when I touch one,” Tanila said as she moved toward the crystal. “I mean… it’s not the same, I guess, with yours, but then again, I’m not certain what the adventurer guild can see.”

Batrire came over and gently squeezed Max’s arm while Tanila approached the crystal. “You can touch it if you want before I go. I don’t expect you to have anything to worry about.”

Frowning, Max didn’t reply; he was just watching Tanila as she mimicked Fowl. The crystal turned blue, and a flash of light came from it.

Sighing and smiling, Tanila turned and moved to where Max was. “It doesn’t bite, I promise.”

Laughing nervously, Max felt the pressure of everyone wanting him to touch it, knowing that somewhere in the world, his parents warned him of peer pressure.

“Fine, I’ll try, but if I die, just remember: Fowl doesn’t get any of my stuff.”

“What?!” exclaimed Fowl as he feigned a look of pain. “I thought we were brothers!”

Ignoring his friends' attempts to calm him down, Max slowly moved until he was only a foot from the crystal. His hands were shaking, and it didn't hit him until then how much this moment really frightened him.

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Max put his hands on the smooth surface of the crystal and waited. He could feel the energy flowing through his hands, yet nothing popped up in his mind or vision. Standing there a few seconds, he opened one eye, scanning the room and seeing that there was no change at all.

"I guess I really can't use it," Max stated as he moved away, realizing his palms had become very sweaty from that brief moment. Wiping them on his pants, he moved so Batrire could select her skill.

"It wasn't that bad, was it?" Tanila asked as he approached and stood beside her.

"If I said I was more scared than the first time I kissed you?"

Tanila slowly turned her head toward Max and smiled, reaching up with a hand and touching his cheek. "Hopefully, you're not afraid of the later part anymore."

"No," he said with a wink, a flash of light going off before he leaned in for a kiss.

"Alright. Let's go," Batrire said, turning to see Max and Tanila looking at each other and how close they had gotten to one another. "Ugnh… wait till we get back to the inn… you know how I feel about public displays of affection."

Tanila held up her other hand, giving Batrire the middle finger, and smiled. Pulling Max's neck up and toward her, she bent her head down and kissed him on the lip for a few moments.

"Ahh, young love," Fowl teased, moving to stand near Batrire. "I remember when you used to do that to me."

Both couples had taken lunch in their rooms, and neither felt the need to discuss how the afternoon was gone when they met for dinner.

"One more day of doing nothing," Max said, smiling as he and Tanila rubbed each other's hands with their thumbs. "What shall we do to pass the time?"

"Apparently, I'm going shopping tomorrow," Fowl groaned, not looking in Batrire's direction.

"Yes, we are… someone needs a few new pairs of clothes. The amount of alcohol they have been consuming in the last week has affected their waistline."

Grumbling, Fowl picked up his tankard of ale and downed it without waiting. "Well, I'll make sure to get my money's worth then."

"What about you two?" Batrire asked as she winked at Tanila. "Any plans for tomorrow?"

"No," the elf shot back, holding her chin high and refusing to get embarrassed. "We'll stay here unless Seth decides he wants to leave the room and do something else."

Fowl chuckled evilly and winked at Max, who ignored the warrior's attempt at being bad.

“So what we’re saying is if you don’t see us until dinner tomorrow night, don’t come looking for us.”

Batrire nodded at Tanila and smiled. “Good. You deserve it.”

“You four sure you want to go in there?”

Max nodded at the male guard outside the dragon dungeon. Yesterday had been an amazing day spent entirely with Tanila, but it was time for the next part of this.

“We are. Surely, you heard we attempted the other.”

The guard nodded and shrugged. “I’m just glad to hear you all made it out okay. It’s been ages since any of us have had someone come down here, and to be honest, knowing someone actually attempted it makes this guard duty worthwhile. I won’t tell you how one gets assigned, but know it’s not one most request for.”

“I’d be bored outa my mind,” Fowl muttered, glancing around the tiny stone room with the glowing yellow portal. “All day?”

“Allllllll day,” the man replied. “Be safe, and I hope to see you all soon.”

After feeling Batrire’s buff, Max nodded and moved through the portal, weapon out.

Nothing attacked him as he came through the portal, and as his eyes adjusted to being able to see, he did a double take at what filled his vision.

“Do you all see that?” Max asked as he glanced behind him and then back ahead.

“I do, but I don’t believe that can be real,” Fowl replied. “Can it?”

Max looked at Tanila, who shook her head just as wide-eyed as Fowl was.

“Holy mother of Ockrim,” Batrire cursed, realizing what she had just said, and covered her mouth. “Forgive me.”

Twenty-five yards ahead of them was a blue portal; behind them was one that they assumed led to the adventurer hall they had come from. They stood inside a fifty-yard-wide circle with a peaceful blue sky and mountains that rose straight to the clouds. Green grass swayed gently in the wind that blew across the area.

“Can this be a trap? I mean…” Max slowly began to move forward, his weapon out, and he took small steps as he moved.

“Is it safe?” Fowl asked, moving closer to their healer and mage, shield and hammer out and ready to use his taunt if something happened.

“Shhh, let me see.”

After a few moments of moving across the area, Max found himself just a few feet away, staring at the portal. Nothing about it looked off, and no creatures appeared in his sonar range.

“I think it’s safe,” he shouted. “I’m not sure why, but this has to be the second-floor portal.”

“Unless the one behind us leads to the second floor!” Fowl shouted back.

Groaning, Max frowned, knowing Fowl might be right. He didn’t know how portals were placed, but every time they had come in before, the portal to leave had always been behind them.

Could someone be doing this to kick us out of the dungeon? Who gets to choose how this all is laid out?”

No response came to his own thought and slight hope for an answer.

“I guess we have to just trust how it has always been,” Max yelled. “Everyone comes here, and I’ll go first again.”

“And if you’re wrong?” Fowl asked as they began to move.

“Then we blame me for picking wrong.”

“Works for me,” Fowl said, trying to lighten the mood a little.

Tanila glanced back at the portal they were walking away from, frowning as she approached where Max awaited them.

“Are you sure?” she asked, constantly looking between the two. “What if…”

“Then I’m wrong, and we miss out, but we could spend days trying to guess which one to take,” Max answered. “Ultimately, we have to choose one, and I’d rather go with my gut.”

“And your gut tells you to take this one?” Fowl asked.

“It does.”

Batrire pointed at the portal with her staff. “Then go, warriors first. If you say you feel it’s this one, I’ll trust your gut, too.”

Max nodded and took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.”

“Wait, what–”

Max heard Fowl start to protest as he touched the portal and felt himself shifting. No guard or anything else appeared in his Sonar area, and he blinked his eyes quickly, trying to speed up the few seconds he had been unable to see anything.

When his eyes worked again, Max groaned. “Mother of elf tits…”

He stepped forward, sensing his other three friends appearing behind him.

“Are we… holy elf tits! Another one!” Fowl exclaimed.

The dungeon floor matched the first one exactly. Nothing looked different, from the color and size of the mountains to the green grass that continued to move in the wind that gently blew over them.

“What is this?” Batrire asked. “Some kind of trick or trap?”

Tanila shook her head and then let out a gulp.

“Do you know?” Max asked, sensing the difference in her heart rate and her reaction.

“No… but I wonder…” she shook her head and stopped talking. She looked again over her shoulder before turning back to face the one further away from them. “Let’s go take that one.”

Max studied Tanila’s face. It was steady and poised, reminding him of when she faced down the demon in the other dungeon.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

Fowl started to protest, but as the other three moved across the grass, he grunted and walked faster, trying to catch up.

“This is crazy,” he muttered as he reached Batrire’s side.

“Yes, but when has anything ever been normal for us?”

Unable to answer that question, Fowl said nothing, watching as Max reached the portal and turned. “Give me two seconds, and then come.”

He turned, not waiting for a response.

The first thing to hit him was the smell. Nothing showed up around him, but there was a smell of death in the air.

As his eyes adjusted and his friends appeared behind him, Max gazed ahead and saw twenty-five yards ahead of him, a dragon so large he had to crane his head up almost all the way to see its head.

“Holy elf tits! A dragon!” Fowl shouted, adjusting his hammer and shield.

Max didn’t say anything, instead taking in the beast before him. The golden dragon had to be almost one hundred feet tall, and its body was wide and long. Massive scales shined as it shifted slightly in the soft sun in the sky. Massive horns flanked both sides of its head, and spikes dotted the back of its neck all the way to the base of its back. Wings that looked large enough to cover a few city blocks were resting against its massive body, and talons and claws bigger than him barely dug into the rocky floor it rested on.

Two silver eyes stared at them, the head shifting slightly from side to side. Teeth that looked like they could bite a mountain in half without effort were visible as the dragon smiled at them.

“Welcome to my domain… it appears you four are the ones causing problems for the demons.”

Max’s head moved back in shock as the dragon spoke, words not filling his ears but instead his head.

“I can hear it in mah head!” Fowl exclaimed, banging his hammer softly against his helm.

“Quiet, you fool,” Batrire growled, thumping Fowl on the helm with her staff.

“I’m sorry,” Max said, doing his best to regain his composure. Though his heart was pounding fast enough that he wasn’t certain it might not explode inside his chest, he asked, “How do you know about what we did to the demons?”

A thrumming noise filled the air as the dragon’s sides shook.

“Word travels fast in the other realms, even when one wishes it did not. I wondered if you four would venture into my domain, knowing that you most likely would after such a victory. Tell me, did that demon try to cheat you in the end?”

“He did,” Max answered. “The gem was trapped.”

It was hard to believe that the dragon was frowning and growling slightly, and a whiff of smoke came from both nostrils.

“That is unpleasant to hear… he will not like that news to be shared, but I am grateful you have. Come, join me where you can sit, and we can talk before the trial. It has been eons since one has graced my domain.”

The dragon turned, as nimble as a cat. The weight of its body and claws did not make a single indention in the stone as it moved toward a spot behind where it had been.

As it moved, the four of them saw four small stone thrones.

“Uh… do we go sit down?” Fowl asked, glancing back at the portal behind them.

“We do,” Tanila quickly replied.

Max studied her face, seeing how she looked enthralled.

Moving as one, they followed the dragon, unsure of what was about to take place.

160 - A Dragon Like No Other

160 - A Dragon Like No Other - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

After they sat down on the stone seats, each stared at the gold dragon who had laid down so that it was easier for them to see.

“Tell me, why have you come for my boon?”

“We plan on defeating the tower of our world,” Tanila said before anyone else could respond.

A grin appeared, and the dragon shifted, a dazzling display of scales reflecting each time he moved.

“That has not happened in a while, but none have sought my boon in what seems like a lifetime. Why do you seek to defeat the tower?”

No one spoke, and each of them shifted.

“Do you not know why one challenges a tower in their world?” the dragon asked, its eyelids narrowing at the four of them.

“I need to get strong enough to protect myself and my friends… no, my family from those who might try to stop or harm us,” Max replied.

Silver eyes became bigger than the moon as the dragon lifted its head, eyelids disappearing momentarily.

“To protect yourself and your family. That is a noble task. It makes me wonder who you might need protecting from.”

One of the dragon's front talons began to tap against the stone floor. It was hard to believe that only a slight sound came, and no part of the rock was damaged.

It shifted its head from side to side a few times, studying them and lost in thought.

“One of you… is the one someone is seeking… searching everywhere and paying greatly to find…” It stopped talking, lifted its neck, and stared up into the sky.

The four of them looked up also, heads swiveling to see if something was coming from above.

A vibration filled the air as the dragon began to thrum, seeing the four of them mimicking his movements.

“Forgive me, I was thinking, pondering for a moment, and looking upward sometimes helps. I am intrigued and yet at an impasse. The rules state certain things in order to acquire my boon. You four faced nothing to see me because I do not like tossing life away like garbage. I am not like the demon who enjoys seeing his own fight amongst themselves for power, entertained at the destruction and damage they cause. Worlds suffer by their hands where they are not bound like they are here, and it is a horrible thing to witness.”

Shifting its back, the wings fluttered slightly, and a gust of wind swept over them.

“The rules I choose to bend slightly are for different reasons. My children take much longer to grow and develop, and while many do give in to the carnal things of youth and lust, I have had eons to see how precious each of their lives are.”

“How old are you?” Fowl asked suddenly.

Batrire hissed, but the thrumming noise came again, and the dragon stretched its neck out, bringing its head close to Fowl, who pressed himself back against the stone of his chair.

“That is a humorous question, one I have not been asked for so long… then again, I have not conversed with one such as yourself, tiny dwarf. Your race has not always

gotten along with my children, each of you fighting over the gold and scales… some battles have been majestic, and others have been completely one-sided.”

The dragon turned sideways, grinning and displaying each of its teeth.

Max could see that his dwarven friend had turned a shade of white and was, for once, silent.

“I am older than what most would consider time and yet even older. No number I could give would make sense to any of you. I sense something old… something dangerous… something being sought by others much younger than me.”

Every part of his body wanted to shake, and Max was doing his best to breathe normally. He failed hard as the dragon swept its head near each of them and stopped before him.

“You have something inside you… it is dangerous, and yet… I can sense it is not what I remember… tell me, human, do you desire power? A power that can destroy worlds and rebuild them as you want?”

Max felt a surge inside him, wanting to say yes, but he fought it, pushing back against that desire while the dragon’s silver eye studied every movement he made.

“No… I do not.” Max finally replied.

The dragon snorted, sending a gust of wind that carried an awful smell, and Max winced as the scent hit his nose.

“You tell the truth, yet I can sense the battle inside. Most peculiar. The men I have watched and seen often will kill their own family to acquire such power, and yet you sit here, surrounded by those things. If you struck them down, you could be stronger than you can ever imagine. Do you realize that?”

Max felt his friends' eyes on him. He could feel the temptation that was always there and knew that this dragon was speaking the truth. Every day, a slight itch offered to be scratched if he would just strike them down while they slept, while they ate, and as they made love.

Love… do you understand what that is?

It is power. Hard to control… even more challenging to master…

Frowning, Max tried to understand those words he heard inside.

“It is right, little man. Love is a power that, when unleashed, can heal lands and cure many things, but when lost, it can destroy life and oneself in the next moment. Make certain you are aware of what power you desire more. Be even more certain of what you will do when you lose those you love.”

Without thinking, Max rubbed his chest. Even with his armor there, it still hurt, and he knew the dragon was right. Max's fear when he and Tanila were surrounded let him lose control, to feed something he feared giving power to because he couldn’t lose her. Now… what would he do to protect her again?

“Can I interrupt?” Tanila asked as she stood from her seat.

Turning to face her, the dragon smiled and gave a slight nod. “You may be the daughter of a King whose hunger for power would take the man you love and even your own life if it meant the King could have it.”

Tanila almost stumbled. The words and truth of so many things hit her worse than any spell or attack she had ever endured. She saw Max start to rise and held up her hand, keeping him in place while she tried to recover, ignoring the soft thrum of the dragon laughing.

“Why are you talking with us? Why are you willing to help us?”

Clearing its throat, the dragon withdrew and laid its head back on the stone floor.

“Those are two exceptional questions. Here are my answers. I am bored, and you four are a rare treat even if you had not defeated the demon’s champion. Knowing that and the truth of who that man is and what he possesses makes me want to learn if he is a threat, one I should remove or allow to live. As far as why I am willing to help you, there is a game that has been played since the first star was born, a game of power and strategy. Pieces are moved, willing to lose over and over to set a trap for one foolish enough to never wonder why success comes easy, only to find themselves trapped in my jaws, their power becoming mine. Your mind can not comprehend what I have seen, and right now, I know that someone has made a move designed just to do that. There are other pieces at play, and many have not realized it, but a few older beings and I know. We are not foolish enough to be caught like some will.

“So, I help because I want a hand in this game. I want to know how the piece is moving here so I may be prepared for future moves. Do not doubt every action I take is for my own personal gain and enjoyment. There is no sentiment or goodwill, as you might call it. Instead, I seek to come out of this game with my scales intact and my children protected. Do you understand?”

Tanila nodded, feeling the force of the words and power behind them. She sat down as a wave of power washed over her.

“So what must we do to earn your boon?” Max asked.

“Normally, you must defeat one of my children, but I can tell I would only be sending one of them to an early grave and granting you something not meant for your kind. As such, I will instead play a different game—one that lets me be involved and yet doesn’t break a rule. No harm will come to you, but you must prove yourself and your strength. Tell me, are you up for a game?”

Max glanced at the others, and they all looked at him, unsure of the best choice.

“Tell me,” Max said, turning back to the dragon. “Why would we trade a fight we are owed for the other option?”

Waves of pressure washed over them as the dragon sat up, its sides shaking from the force of its laughter.

Each of them plugged their ears, having no real success at the pain it caused.

“Forgive me,” the dragon said, cutting off its laughter as it watched the four of them suffer from its outburst. “Here is what I will do. If you choose to prove yourself how I ask, I will grant you one of my scales and my boon. You should know that such a scale as mine has yet to be seen in so long that I cannot fathom the power it might

provide to one skilled in the art of crafting. If by some chance you are able to impress me, I will grant you a tooth. Know that if your kind can find a way to craft with it, no greater weapon will ever be found."

"And if I manage to greatly impress you?" Max asked, his mind already beginning to figure out what the creature must be deciding."

It began to thrum again, quickly stopping as it remembered the effects of the last time. The dragon grinned, moving till its snout was only a few yards from Max.

"If you think you can greatly impress me, then know I will give you something no man has ever had from me."

Max looked at the dragon, seeing the sparkle in its silver eyes, then nodded.

"Very well, if you promise that no harm will come to me and my friends, that we will be granted your boon no matter what, and a scale shall be given to us, then we will accept the challenge instead of facing one of your children and unnecessarily taking their life."

The dragon nodded, moved back a step, and then lay on the ground. A grin bigger than any it had shown today grew across its snout, revealing every tooth it possessed.

"I accept and swear to that agreement."

"Tell me then, what test do you have?"

The golden dragon stood on all fours, spreading its massive wings, which blotted out the sky and sun and stretched until it was so immense that Max couldn't see every part of it without shifting his head multiple times.

It roared with its head pointed upward, the blast of air aimed away from them, and yet they could feel it, almost crushing their minds with a desire to flee and hide behind the stone chairs.

Seconds passed, and when the dragon finally stopped its show of power, it folded itself back up and lay on the ground once more, its head resting on the ground as if nothing had just happened.

"You will get to hit me, and I will get to gauge your strength."

161 - A Game

161 - A Game - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

Max stood there, stunned, trying to ensure he had heard the dragon correctly.

Turning to look at Talina and the others, Max saw that each had their mouths open and then checked his, finding that his, too, was open in shock.

"I'm sorry? You want me to attack you?"

“I did not stutter, did I?

“No, I mean… why? Why would you want me to attack you?”

The dragon laughed, his body sending waves out again, and once more, they groaned under its force. Grunting, the dragon stopped itself again.

“I have not experienced the touch of actual battle in so long. Part of the problem of being me is that I am bound by rules and contracts. Even as powerful as I am, to break those would invite others of similar power and strength to work together and openly assault me and my kind. That could mean the end of me. Do you understand?”

“He’s bored?” Fowl asked.

“To put it in terms you understand, then yes, dwarf, I am bored.”

The pair of silver eyes watched Max as he turned and looked at the rest of his group.

“So we attack you, but you won’t attack us?”

“Correct, I have struck that bargain.”

“And, depending on how that attack goes, determines any potential prize you might give?”

The dragon began to thrum slightly at Max’s words. “A gift… to say a prize makes this feel like some game, and trust me, this is no game. Depending on how you perform, I will determine the choices I must make in the coming time. Do you understand?”

Max nodded and moved to where Talina was, motioning for the dwarves to join them.

“It's serious, isn’t it?” Batrire asked, glancing at the dragon as they began to chat.” It really wants you to hit it.”

“Just Seth though… doesn’t seem fair,” Fowl complained even though he winked as he said it.

“Are you okay with doing this?” Talina asked, studying Max’s expression.

He grimaced and nodded. “I’d rather not fight a dragon and put any of you at risk if we can gain the boon and a scale without risk. My real question is his end game… why see what I can do?”

“He told you,” Tanila replied. “He wants to see what you are capable of. Prove that you’re worthy, and he will take part in whatever game must be taking place by things we don’t even know of.”

“You’re talking about gods!” Fowl exclaimed. “Are you saying gods are really this involved in our lives?”

Batrire shook her head and pointed a finger at Max. “They’re involved in his… we are somehow tied to him… why I’m not certain, but we’ve all known in for a while now. Whatever this *game* the dragon has mentioned multiple times, Seth is a piece that is going to gather a lot of attention, and if we can have the items the dragon has promised, those will be a massive reward on top of the boon.”

Max sighed as he realized the truth he had avoided believing for so long. He was just a piece in some game that the gods played, and worse, he didn't have a say in it. All he could do was try to get strong enough to protect them.

"I'll do it. Hopefully, I can impress him."

"How many attempts will I get?"

The dragon stared at Max, who had taken out his halberd and was moving toward it.

"I will give you three chances. Use any skill you deem worthy to use. Don't hold back. Trust me, I can take it."

The confidence of the voice in Max's head from the dragon made him wonder how he could impress the beast at all.

"I would suggest you have your friend enchant you with her spell I sensed when you first came in. Perhaps it will help a little."

Batrire began casting her enchantment, and Max snorted, shaking his head as if a dragon that was greater than any legend he could recall was asking him to attack.

Max rubbed his chin with his left hand while he leaned against his weapon. His mind wanted to figure out the best options, and staring at the scales wider than he was and at least half his height, Max studied where they came together.

I know you're there… tell me, will you help?

Silence was there for a moment, and then Max felt the presence he was becoming used to.

I will take the last attack. Do what you can first. The plan you are thinking of is a smart one.

Grinning, Max took a deep breath.

"I realized I never asked your name yet," Max said as he began to rotate his shoulders and shake his legs a little.

"I cannot share because doing so would break a rule. Knowing my name right now would be like having a light from the heavens shining on you every second of every day. Others in this game would know you immediately, and you are not strong enough for that yet."

Max nodded. "Very well, I will start now if that is okay. Ignore the first attack; I just want to get an idea of how hard your scales are."

The dragon snorted, thrumming slightly, and watched with his eyes as Max moved up next to his neck.

"Very well, let us see what you can do."

Max took a few steps back, planted his feet, and focused on a spot where two scales came together. Dashing forward, he planted his feet in the perfect position, used his hips, and sliced his axe against the dragon's scales.

The impact made barely any noise, yet Max felt like his arms and hands were going to shatter. The force of the vibrations almost caused him to drop his weapon.

“If that was the best you can do I should try to go back on my word. Now, stop playing around and show me what you are capable of!”

The noise from how the dragon spoke in his head almost brought Max to his knees.

“Very well, can you close your eyes and let me use a Stealth skill?”

The dragon coughed, almost as if it was choking.

“You have a Stealth skill? A warrior?! Oh, this should be delightful… very well, I shall close my eyes and deactivate my ability to sense you.”

A gentle thrum came from the dragon as Max moved close to the spot he had struck before.

“One last thing, I… I may not be able to stop myself for a few attacks… I have a skill that–”

“Do not worry. I shall endure whatever you throw at me.”

Planting his feet, Max nodded and activated Stealth, seeing that the dragon still had its eyes shut.

[Stealth]

[Weakness]

[Power Strike]

[Rampage]

[Berserker]

He had begun to thrust his weapon forward, aiming the sharp tip of his weapon at the same spot where the two scales overlapped when Max activated every skill.

There was no time for the red vision to take effect when the weapon connected. The first strike hit its target, and two more attacks struck so fast that none of Max’s allies could see the halberd move. The dragon moved slightly as he continued to attack the neck of the dragon, red rage overwhelming him.

Suddenly, his vision returned, and Max blinked, looking at the spot where he had attacked. A tiny piece of the scale he had attacked was gone, no bigger than his fingernail.

“Impressive,” the lord of the dungeon said as it turned its head back toward Max and grinned. “I am impressed at the strength you have hidden inside you… Not many will be able to stand against such an attack if they are foolish enough to give you their neck so easily as I have.”

“Now then, it is time I gave you your reward,” the dragon declared as it started to rise.

“Wait! I get one more attack!”

Pausing, the gold dragon angled its head and studied Max, seeing the determination in the man’s stance.

“You think you can do better?” it asked, laughing and shaking the area where Max stood. “Should we really waste either of our time with such–”

“One more attack. I promise I can do better.”

They stood there for a few moments, each staring at the other, neither moving.

“Very well,” the dragon replied, returning to the position it had held before. “Do not disappoint me, or I will reconsider if I am impressed at all.”

Max nodded. “I understand. It's the same thing as before if you will. I’m going to stealth again.”

Snorting as if annoyed, the dragon growled for a moment. “Very well.”

“I’ll need a moment to prepare, so I apologize for the wait.”

Grunting, the gold dragon turned its head and went silent. Max could see that the scale he had damaged was completely healed; the tiny piece was no longer missing.

Are you ready for this?

I will show this old one why even their kind fears me. Now listen, you must not try to take control back at all. I will do things you cannot do, but we will fail if you ask questions or try to take over.

You swear to only attack the dragon and then, when you are done, return control to me?

Dissatisfaction at that request came through the tone when Max heard the voice in his head.

I swear. Now close your eyes and let go. Do not try to watch or understand. No matter what you feel or experience, know that I will never harm you because doing so would hurt me.

Max nodded, taking a deep breath. Closing his eyes, Max let the breath out slowly.

Then, the world went dark.

“HOW! HOW!”

Max went to grab his head but could not. His sonar and vision returned, and he found himself pinned by the gold dragon’s front talons to the stone floor.

“What?” Max gasped, the pain of the dragon’s shouting making his head feel like it was going to split open.

“You drew blood! My blood! Blood that has not been spilled long before the god who controls your planet was born or the god before him! HOW!?”

Max winced, his eyes watering as he felt the dragon's weight pressing on him.

“I don’t know,” he forced out, trying to breathe. “I can’t breathe! Our promise!”

When those last two words were spoken, the pressure on his body was immediately gone, and Max took deep breaths, trying to fill his lungs, which felt like they would be crushed.

Turning his head, he saw his three friends, each holding their heads, trying to stand, and struggling as he was.

A roar echoed through the air and the dungeon, shaking the ground as he lay on it.

Movement out of the corner of his eye made him turn, and Max felt and saw the gold dragon’s head mere feet away from his, the silver eye that was as large as his body shaking.

“Who… what are you?”

Its voice was quieter, no longer making him feel like someone was beating his skull with a hammer.

“I am Seth –.”

“Your real name!”

The voice thundered through his head again, and Max winced.

“Max Hoste.”

As the dragon’s head pulled back, a talon appeared, pressing into his forehead. Max wanted to turn or fight back, but he knew that if the dragon wanted to kill him, there would be nothing he could do.

Suddenly, an explosion of light and something else erupted in his brain. It tore at the fabric of his mind and then was pushed back.

“Impossible…”

“The… promise… our deal…” Max groaned, his mind feeling like someone was trying to cut it open.

Growling, the dragon pulled its talon from Max’s head and moved back.

“Very well, you have earned your rewards. Come, let us finish this game.”

161A - Meeting With an Ancient

[161A - Meeting With an Ancient - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road]

Wekime sat on a simple chair made of a material Phaius had never managed to acquire yet. It wasn’t something most could get, having been created and lost eons before he ever rose to power.

The room he was in was again a simple stone type. This room was the same size as the one he had waited in.

There is more power in this room than in my entire realm... how?!

The creature before Phaius was more ancient than he knew. Time did not bother one of its kind. The rumors of the ones who had first built this system were only discussed in private. Most, like himself, worried that somehow mentioning their names would attract their attention.

Still, the dragonkin looked at him with those silver eyes, its body covered with golden scales. Even though it looked like a humanoid being, only three fingers with long nails were on each hand, and the teeth that were present from its extended face left no doubt it could easily cut through him in a moment. The tail that ran behind the chair twitched slightly, almost as if by reflex, as Phaius moved toward the ancient one.

“You may speak,” the servant said, its body covered in a grey robe with a hood. No part of it showed, and its voice sounded like gravel being ground underfoot on stone.

“Thank you for seeing me, Wekime,” Phaius said, bowing low. “I am grateful you did not make me wait long to bask in your presence.”

A low thrum came from Wekime as he smiled and shook his head.

“What are a few months? Simply time that matters not to ones like us. Not even seconds for you or I.”

Phaius fought to keep his face steady.

Two months?! It should have only been two weeks!

“Yes, you are right. May I make my petition?”

Three talons waved in the hand, and Wekime looked bored. He gave a slight nod.

“Thank you,” Phaius said, bowing slightly again. “I am certain you have heard the rumors of a black skill being unleashed on one of my worlds. I was wondering if perhaps you could assist me in tracking down if that skill was still active and, if so, how I might find out who possesses it. To have a skill like that loose would spell destruction for many–”

Wekime leaned forward in his chair, and his talons came up, almost seeming to have stolen the voice from Phaius’s lips.

“I am aware of the rumors. No doubt there are some concerned about whether this is real or not,” Wekime stated, putting his hands together on his lap. “The problem is which black skill it might be. Are you aware of what it is?”

Frowning, Phaius shook his head, still not confident his voice would work and not wanting to look weak if it failed him.

“Let me ask you a question. Be very careful how you answer this. I know you are still young, less than twenty thousand years old. After already giving me two of your worlds, are you certain that you want to invest more in this endeavor? If the skill has been removed, you will no longer need to worry about yourself and will be giving away more power than someone your age should on a chance.”

Wekime stood, the chair vanishing as he rose. His body seemed to grow as he rose, almost touching the ceiling, while Phaius felt like he was yards away from it.

“And if it was confirmed and the wielder of it found, then what? Should you spend time hunting for the individual yourself? The cost of that would drain you faster than you want to admit. You could easily command those under you to search for the owner, but if they have failed you already, do you believe they would succeed now?”

“But it’s a black skill!” Phaius declared anxiously.

“It is,” Wekime replied, a grin appearing across his face. “This isn’t the first time they have been loosed, and if one is free, the other two shall soon be as well. While not in your domains, though that would be humorous if so, you must think about what is coming and decide what you will do.”

Blinking rapidly, Phaius tried to consider what Wekime was talking about.

Looking at the floor, the one who believed himself to be a god to fear felt the thread of a memory drift into his mind.

A battle... the three have to fight... one will remain... and then...

Though his skin was a tanned color that he preferred, Phaius felt his face drain of all color for a moment.

“You cannot be serious?” he gasped, looking at Wekime, who was once again reclining in his chair.

“I am. Decide the role you want to play. I on the other hand, decline to help. The gift you gave of power for this meeting shall be half returned. Choose which world you wish to keep. The other I shall be content with.”

The servant appeared and gestured with his hand to a door behind Phaius, which was open and leading from the room.

Struggling with what he had learned, Phaius turned to leave, a fog of realization setting in.

“Phaius, one last thing,” Wekime called out, his voice sounding amused. “I would stop using your power to try to track down this person if they are still alive. Instead, you better prepare yourself for what is coming.”

With that comment, the doorway came to Phaius, moving past him until he and the servant were alone in a room.

“Have you decided what planet to gift my master with?”

A token appeared in his hand, and Phaius handed it to the servant, dropping it without paying attention. The moment it hit the servant's hand, he felt a massive amount of power leave him.

I need to make allies... and I need more strength...

The door to leave materialized and Phaius strode through it with haste. There was no more time to waste.

162 - Entering The Tower

162 - Entering The Tower - Ultimate Level 1 LitRPG ((Book 3 Stubs June 30th!! Hits Amazon July 1st!)) | Royal Road

Max slowly got to his feet. The dizziness he felt was gone, and when he looked, his friends were standing as well. None of them looked any better, even though they hadn't taken a talon to the head.

"You are far stronger than you should be, and whatever it is that you did, even if I cannot find out how you have greatly impressed me. For that, you will collect all that I promised, and hopefully, we will not meet again for a few tens of thousands of years."

Blinking, Max shook his head, trying to understand what the dragon was saying.

He watched as the dragon lowered its head and put a talon in its mouth. The sound that came as it ripped a tooth from its mouth was almost sickening, but in a few seconds, a tooth fell to the ground before him at his feet. The blood from it sizzled as it hit the stone, and Max jumped back, unsure of what might happen if some got on him.

It was longer than he was and almost as thick.

"A tooth worthy of impressing me. Not something I actually believed you could do."

It then reached its talon up to its chest, digging underneath a scale and wiggling it until it slid under, popping a massive giant scale from its chest. With two talons, it pinched the scale and pulled it from its body, small connecting pieces of flesh stretching until they snapped, freeing the scale entirely.

Setting the scale on top of the bone, the dragon did something with its talon, drawing a rune of some sort in the air. A gem appeared, giving off a gold light as it rested on a pedestal of black metal.

"Touch it and claim the boon you have been promised."

The four of them came together, each waiting. As Max held his hand out near the orb, he heard no warning and so nodded, each of them touching it. Warmth and power flooded through them.

[Defense of the Dragon Acquired]

Each of them smiled, nodding at the other.

"You three must go. Your friend and I need a moment alone for the last gift."

"But—"

Bending its head till it almost touched Fowl, a growl came from the dragon's snout.

"I said go. He shall not be harmed and will return safely to you in a moment. I have sworn and will not break my word."

Stumbling backward, Fowl nodded and looked at Max, who motioned to the portal where they had first come in.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Max whispered as Tanila walked past him, brushing his arm with her hand.

She nodded and moved toward the portal, not looking back.

When the three were gone, Max felt the dragon enter his sphere of detection and turned to see it watching him.

“I will make a pact with you, something most will never offer, and you will be foolish to turn down. Collect your trophies first, and then come to where I am.”

Max paused momentarily, watching the gold dragon move off and lie on the ground. He went to where the scale and the tooth lay on the ground and picked them up one at a time, putting them in his storage.

Turning, Max saw the dragon watching him as he walked toward it.

“Come close, close enough to touch my head.”

Max tried not to stop as he continued walking, unsure what was about to happen.

“Take your glove off, put your hand on my head, and relax. This next part will be easy.”

“What next part?” Max asked, nervous as he placed his hand against the warm, gold scales of the dragon’s snout. They felt harder than anything he could remember touching.”

“We are going to make a pact. Do not share this with anyone, not even your friends, as it will not provide the same level of protection if you share it.”

“A pact? What will that do?”

Sighing, sending warm gusts of air and a few pieces of snot over Max’s head, the dragon groaned.

“I forget, you are not aware of these things. You and I will make a promise not to attack each other or directly oppose one another's moves in the game I play. Please wait,” the dragon said as Max began to open his mouth. “If what I experienced today continues to grow, eventually you will become strong enough for me to approach, but you must conquer the tower of your world. This pact will keep most of my children from attacking you on sight. This does not mean they will be friendly, but you may be able to converse with a few and come to an agreement with them. Just know the younger ones are less likely to agree to such things and will often warn you to leave before attacking.”

Max’s mind was reeling with questions, and he wondered if this was how Fowl always felt.

“Now, here comes the easy part. Keep your hand on me and speak your answer. If at any point you say no, the pact will be broken, and we will be done. Do you understand?”

Max nodded. “You’re not going to try and bind me to something to aid your cause, are you?”

A slight thrum came from the dragon's body, and a smile crept on the lips his hand was so close to.

“No… others might, but I will not. Just know, Max Hoste, someone is looking for you, and they are skilled in finding someone like you. That is how I knew who you were before we met.”

Groaning, Max nodded and pressed his hand harder against the scales.

“Do you, Max Hoste, agree to form a pact with me?”

A moment ticked by before Max realized it was time for him to speak.

“Yes.”

Where his hand was, a soft glow began to appear.

“Are you willing to agree that neither of us will directly oppose the other unless our lives or those we love are endangered?”

Nodding, Max smiled. “Yes.”

The glow began to get brighter, making Max have to squint to be able to see.

“I agree to keep your name a secret and hidden from all who might try to find it out from me. Is this something you desire?”

“Most definitely, yes!”

The massive dragon let out a slight growl, but the spot where Max’s hand was pressed against a scale was almost burning. The light was so bright that his eyes were closed, yet he could still see it.

The scale began to get hotter, and Max was certain he could smell his flesh burning.

“Push through this,” the dragon said.

Focusing on his breathing, Max willed his hand not to move. Time stretched on, and suddenly, the light and the burning sensation were gone.

“It is done. The bond is complete.”

Pulling his hand back, Max saw a slight shimmer on his palm before it disappeared. “What… what happened?”

Thrumming, the dragon lifted its head up and shook it. “You are marked. I will know where you are, and in time, you will know where I am. If you encounter one of my children, they will see the mark. As I mentioned, it is not guaranteed to grant you safety, but it might. Now go, Max Hoste. Be the piece that captures the players.”

His mind was still swirling with questions, but Max knew the odds of him getting more answers were probably zero. He gave a slight bow and turned, walking away as he stared at his hand a bit longer.

“Be ready. It won’t be long before they track you down.”

Turning around, Max saw the dragon flying high into the sky, his wings silent and far enough away that its golden scales looked like a sun rising upward.

“It still sucks you can’t share what happened,” Fowl groaned.

Max shrugged while gently squeezing Tanila’s hand. “I’m just glad things worked out. Besides, we all know how Everett and Tom are going to react if we ever give them those items.”

“Which I still say we shouldn’t,” Batrire replied. “The only problem is finding someone we could trust to craft them into something we can use.”

“I know some people,” Fowl said. “I’m pretty certain if we took that to my family, it would make up for how I left…”

Sighing, Max nodded. “We got time to figure it out. For now, I’m ready for what’s coming next.”

Fowl bobbed his head in agreement and held out his hand, laughing when Max high-fived him.

“Gods, we’re doomed with these two,” Batrire groaned.

As the four exited the carriage, the driver called out, “You sure you want me to wait?”

“Yeah, we won’t be long. This will be quick!” Max replied, smiling.

The driver shook his head and then moved to where a few other carriages were waiting.

Looking upward, the four of them stared at the tower. It was massive, requiring them to crane their necks backward as it ran into the clouds above. Stonework, like an older style long forgotten, had massive pillars and arches on some floors. Others were made of one solid stone. A few had plants growing out the side, and ever so often, one even had water running down that vanished into nowhere.

“Who would have thought?” Fowl asked, his voice lower than usual. “All my dreams, and here we are.”

A group came from the path that led to the tower, and Max and the rest turned to see the party of three dwarves and two elves smiling and chatting as they made their way toward them.

“It seems like it is possible to be happy,” Batrire said. “If elves are laughing, it must be a good time inside.”

Talina shook her head, rolling her eyes as she glanced up again at the tower. “You’re certain you want to go in?” she asked.

“We’re not staying, just going to crush those gems we got. Then we can return to the Faction house and wait for our new teammate.”

“Enough waiting,” Fowl said, grabbing Batrire’s hand. “Let’s go!”

They all began to laugh and move toward the entrance, getting a few nods from the party they passed, who saw them laughing and smiling.

Max heard one of the dwarves say ‘*newbies*’ after they passed, getting a laugh from the others, but he didn’t care. They were new to this, and he was excited. His heart was pounding, and even though Talina held his sweaty hand, he was ready.

Outside the massive stone arch that shimmered with a vibrating hum, a pair of guards stepped forward with their hands out.

“Stop! You four need to check in first!” the female guard shouted.

The two guards were covered in very light-looking plate armor with pieces that moved better than the standard full pieces. Each had an emblem of the capital on their shoulder, and the shield they carried had a matching one on it.

“We just hit level fifty!” Fowl exclaimed, smiling from ear to ear. “We are just going in for a moment and then coming right back out.”

The woman nodded, a slight smile on her face, while the man to her left remained expressionless. “I understand. I just need you to show me your level. After that, you can enter.”

Fowl went first, getting a nod from the guard as he moved past her, waiting on Batrire, who received the same nod.

Talina passed by quickly, and when Max showed his edited status screen, the woman smiled and motioned for him to join the others.

“Good luck. As you return a few more times, we will begin to recognize you and won’t require this every time.”

Laughing, the four of them raced toward the portal and stopped.

“This seems corny, but we can all hold hands,” Batrire stated. “Unless you don’t want to, that is fine.”

Fowl and Tanila each grabbed one of Batrire’s hands while Max and Tanila intertwined their fingers.

Stepping into the portal, they felt something inside them change, and their vision faded.

“Holy elf tits,” Fowl exclaimed before anyone else could get a chance. “This place is massive.”

Standing a few yards before an arch like the one they had come through, the dungeon turned into a massive, sprawling space below them. A ramp led down, and then there were different areas with grass, some spots with trees, and a few places

they could make out with some mountains jutting out. A lake could be seen at the edge of their vision, and the light on this floor seemed to match the light outside.

They grinned as they realized that none of the dungeons they had ever been in could compare to this.

“You all got yours?” Max asked, holding a yellow gem between his fingers for the rest to see.

Each of them nodded, plucking theirs from storage.

“Count of three. One, T–”

“Wait on three or after three?” Fowl asked, cutting off Max.

Batrire groaned and shook her head. “On three! Always on three, you fool!”

“Okay… everyone ready this time?” Max asked again, looking at Fowl, who was grinning like an idiot.

“One, two, three.”

Each of them crushed the tiny yellow gem, and when they did, a surge of light rushed through their fingers, causing them all to jerk slightly.

[Tower Affinity Activated]

[.5% Tower Experience Gained]

“Holy elf tits,” Tanila joked.

Fowl laughed and nodded. “And those creatures below drop these?”

“That’s what I’ve been told,” she replied, glancing at Batrire and Max.

Rubbing his chin, Fowl began pulling out his plate armor. “I guess we should maybe verify that first? I mean, I’d hate to have wrong information.”

“What do you think, Seth? Up for maybe a few quick monsters?” Talina asked.

Max pulled Talina close, kissing her for a moment before releasing her. “I guess a few can’t hurt.

[Full Status Check]

*****

Max Hoste

18-Year-old Human Male

Level 1

Exp 1/1000

Tower Experience: .5%

HP: 1630/1630

MP: 1140/1140

Stamina: 815/815

STR: 161

DEX: 157

CON: 163

INT: 114

WIS: 114

Defense of the Dragon - .5%

Defense of the Demon - .5%

Demon Essence: - 340

Leather Boots - 1 DEX + 5% Speed Bonus while running

Black Quick Pants - 2 STR/DEX +10% Movement Bonus

Ogre’s Black Tunic - 3 STR/CON/DEX + 10% Magic Resist +10% Attack Damage

Black Bracers - 3 STR/CON +15% Damage decrease slashing/piercing

Belt of the Golem - 4 STR/CON +25% Damage decrease slashing/piercing

Scout Spider Helm - 5 STR/CON/DEX. Invisible State, Grants Minor Poison Resist

Cloak of Spider - 5 Dex. Spider Walk - 5 mins / 24 hour cooldown

Green Ring - 1 DEX

Black Rabbit Ring - 2 DEX

Ring of the Golem Prince - 4 CON +25% magic resist

Black Boss Band - 20% Stat Increase

Skills:

Baking - Common

Consume - Epic

Melee Weapon Mastery - Rare

Shield - Rare

Berserker - Uncommon

Elemental Mastery - Uncommon

Stealth - Rare

Dual Wield - Rare

Power Strike - Uncommon

Backstab - Uncommon

Evasion - Uncommon

Archery - Rare

Haste - Uncommon

Festering Touch - Common

Death Magic - Uncommon

Conceal - Epic

Regeneration - Rare

Armored Warrior - Rare

Intimidation - Rare

Dark Magic - Rare

Rampage - Rare

Weakness - Rare

Demonic Magic - Rare

Demonic Summoning - Rare

Demonic Teleportation - Epic

*****